

CHAPTER I

Zay

I rose to a sitting position with a groan as my body protested the sudden movement so recently after waking. With another groan I wiped the sleep out of the corner of my eyes and with it, all the evidence I had just woken up. Accepting the fact I had no choice but to start to get ready for the big day I swung my legs over the side of the couch and stood up before walking down the hall and taking the first door on the right to my room. I rubbed my hands against my face as I felt my eyes drooping closed and my body screaming for sleep, but I had to resist because today was the day I hated most and I had to get ready to endure it. Today was the start of the Festival.

The Festival marked the anniversary of the rise of Dominick the emperor after Marcus who expanded the Roman Empire to almost four times its previous size. He was not well loved but was the greatest commander Rome had ever seen which gave him a

high amount of respect and traditions honoring his tremendous victories in war and in progress.

I walked over to the dresser, opened the top drawer, and picked out a pair of boxers, a plain solid black button shirt, and nice solid black dress pants from the drawers below. Dreading the journey I dragged my feet over to the bed, sat down, put my right foot on top of my left thigh, and pulled the fuzzy bunny slipper off then repeated the process with the other foot before I stood up, removed the rest of my clothing and sleepily changed into the new clothes.

Picking out a tie was easy for the Festival, I thought to myself, just get something with a bit of red in it. I reached out and picked up the same tie I always wore, a solid black with thin red lines working themselves around it, and put it on. Walking to the closet to pick out the suit jacket with the same pattern as the tie was almost unbearable, I was still unsure of what possessed me to stay up till 4am the day before today of all the days. I was sure I'd regret it more than once during the day.

I took my "Festival" shoes out of their box which had become buried under others over the last year. I put them on hardly noticing the thin red lines in varying patterns about them. Everything was always red on this day, especially the "attractions" the government supplied.

I slipped my phone into my front pocket, grabbed the car keys, opened the door, and walked out into the beautiful dawn of a new day that spoke nothing of the annual horror that was about to take place. My stomach growled as I walked down to my deep blue corvette but I was determined to stand by my choice of not eating today till after the start of the festival since I did not wish to risk having it come back up as it had a previous year.

I ran my hand over the dent in the car door, the only part of the car I hadn't spent half of my money into fixing, from when I'd

been hit in the side by a driver who'd ran a red light and both of us had nearly died. Oddly enough that same driver was now my best friend in the world, Nik. Hours talking to each other in the hospital had brought us closely together and we'd only grown closer since leaving it. That was almost 2 years ago.

Gripping the door handle I pulled back on it opening the door, slightly cringing at the creaking as the door opened. It was really never the same after the accident. I settled into the driver seat, turned on the car, and closed the door before pulling the case of CDs off the floor of the passenger seat. Going through them I selected a mix CD with some metal and rock on it. Half losing myself in the rhythm of the instruments and half paying attention to my surroundings I pulled out of the drive-way and headed to the festival arena.

The drive was relatively uneventful, a few stop lights, people on bikes, people walking, but everyone had one thing in common. They were all going in the same direction, to the Arena. The festival was a requirement. I arrived shortly at the building they used to perform security scans before entering the same area as the Arena. The building was ancient having been there for hundreds of years, its massive arches gleaming in the morning sun.

The guard booth with a much more recent construction date was made of similar architecture with small arches and polished stone columns. The car ahead of me pulled forward after the official was done with them and sure enough it was my turn at the checkpoint. I handed the government official my ID, and had the identification code on my wrist scanned before I was allowed to continue on my way to the Arena.

I came to the high powered scanners and slowed down to 5mph as the signs to each side suggested until I reached the marked zone for me to stop the car. An armed guard soon appeared at my window and asked me to step out of my car and after a brief pat

down search asked me to follow him and promptly lead me to a dull gray windowless building nearby.

Once inside I was lead down a hall into a room with a one-way mirror, a table, and two chairs. Your standard polite government questioning room. The guard soon left the room after I'd taken a seat and locked the door after he'd left. After about five minutes a familiar face walked into the room and sat across from me.

“Hey there, Zay. I had a feeling it was you when the guards described the car and the young man driving it. I tried to tell them about your situation but you know how some of these new recruits can be fresh out of boot,” Jack said.

“No worries Jack. This is only the second time this has happened.”

“I'll call off the unpleasant searches now that I know its you. Do you have your card on you so we can let you out of here?”

I handed Jack the card from my wallet that explained my disabilities and let me get through scanners after my left arm set off the alarms. How I got that arm of mine was still fresh in my mind...

We were heading back to Jake's place after one of the late night contests of strength where Zul the Mighty was taking on some new challenger that was hoping to make a name for himself. But the fresh meat had lost and nobody ever remembers the names of the losers.

Jake was in the passenger seat doing something so stupid it was funny. He was doing stand up with chopsticks hanging out of his nose. I never got to hear the end of that act of his because moments later my world turned upside down, literally.

The truck slammed into the side of my corvette dead center with the space right behind my door. The moment it hit I was rocked back into my seat while at the same time slamming my head forward heading for the steering wheel when a glorious white bag

came and punched me in the face saving my life.

Jake, on the other hand, wasn't so lucky. His head slammed forward like mine had and his airbag didn't deploy, causing his hysterical chopsticks to hit the dashboard and impale his brain. I still wonder to this day how his act was gonna end.

Mere moments later my car was propelled sideways by the force of the impact and rolled over on top of itself. I was surprised that I didn't feel like anything was broken, never realizing how wrong I had been until minutes later, when the shock and adrenaline had worn off and a lady looked in through the side window and started screaming half way through asking if we were alright.

I thought she was looking at Jake but realized looking at him she couldn't have known what happened to him, he looked unconscious with his head laying against the dash. I followed her eyes to my side and saw the mess which used to be my arm. I'd had it down at my side adjusting the seat since I'd let Jake drive on the way to the arena for the show and I was still trying to find where I liked it.

My arm was more than broken, it was shattered. Bone was sticking out of the skin in several places. I became aware of the pain at that moment. My vision turned blurry and everything seemed impossibly bright and everything in my brain was screaming from the pain. I sank into sweet blissful unconsciousness.

I woke later to blindly bright lights and squinted painfully till my eyes adjusted. I looked around and saw my room was devoid of life. It pained me slightly to learn I had no visitors waiting for me to wake up. Every time I've been here almost every room had someone there visiting.

I looked out the window and noticed that it was night time. I laid back in the bed resting my head on the pillow noticing my body seemed numb and hardly alert. Pain-killers I thought to myself, that has to be it, there is no way I'm paralyzed. I bet Jake was okay

and would come in and cheer me up in my groggy state.

I was enjoying myself imagining scenarios of what he would do when he saw me all drugged up like this. During these thoughts the nurse came in, saw I was awake, and called for a doctor; not wasting an opportunity to get the drop on my friend I asked her where Jake was. When I saw her pitying expression I remembered what had happened. It came in flashes but it was enough to remind me of the events that recently took place.

My shoulders slumped in grief and sadness and she told me she was sorry for my loss. Part of me doubted she really was, she probably saw cases like these every month and had grown numb to it by now. A river of tears was coming out of my eyes as I grieved for my friend. The doctor came in a few minutes later and broke right down to business ignoring my emotional situation.

“Look Mr. Darton your arm is in critical condition. We can either amputate it or do a operation and give you a new appendage. The latter is a risky new and very expensive procedure and we can not proceed without your approval.”

I have to choose between having an arm or not? What a stupid question! I thought to myself. Money wasn't a huge concern to me. My parents had left me a large inheritance before they disappeared. I chose the operation and soon found myself with a whole left arm with a solid titanium bone structure full of artificial marrow underneath my regular skin. The only downside was a lack of nerves in some places and the scar that ran from my armpit to my wrist. I'd taken to wearing long sleeves since the operation.

I grimaced looking down at my arm as I recalled how I got it. I flexed my arm and fingers. It was a habit I'd picked up since the operation. Trying to see if I could recall how it felt to have real bone from my shoulder to the tips of my fingers. I couldn't really find a difference other than my sense of feeling being slightly dulled. I caught a glimpse of Jack out of the corner of my eyes and

saw he was looking at me strangely. Composing myself I pulled my attention from my thoughts and focused it on him.

Getting up we shook each others hands and walked out of the room heading back towards my car. Once we were outside Jack shook his head after looking at my damaged car, “You still haven’t fixed that beauty yet? It’s been 2 years already Zay.”

“I like to keep the door damaged Jack. It reminds me of how close I came to dying that day.”

I got back into my car, put the key in the ignition, turned it, and relaxed as the familiar rumble began. Jack appeared at my window so I brought it down a little to hear him more clearly.

“I have a bad feeling about this Festival. Like something bad is gonna happen. There’s always rumors, you know. But this year just feels different. Keep out of trouble Zay. I like you, but that doesn’t mean I won’t hesitate to shoot you if I need to. Take care kid,” he said before leaving just as quickly as he came. I switched gears and passed through the security zone.

Turning the corner I got my first glimpse of the arena that day, the purple banners with golden eagles with SPQR printed at the top shining in the sun and blowing in the wind. The arena was based off the old Amphitheatrum Flavium but was more than 5 times its size. We called it the Colosseum due to its size and it was truly a wondrous site with its arches and pillars stretching far up toward the sky, each archway offering a view to the inside of the building protected by a thin piece of glass that was cleaned weekly to keep it perfectly clear.

Every few arches there would be placed at statue of a slave who had risen to freedom, a short depiction of a story of the gods, or more commonly and more simply sculptures of the gods themselves. Some of them still carried a Greek nature about them in the flowing robes but the faces and poses showed their strong Roman nature nearly radiating from them.

Two guards were standing outside the main gate to the Colosseum, both wearing a mix of deep violet and purple full body armor along with a long draping cloak also purple with white trimming with a gold SPQR blazing on the back. They also carried assault rifles strapped on their backs for easy access and maneuverability as well as a pistol at their side that was bigger than my hand. Their armor was ceremonial, representing the government that employed them, but their load out was deadly serious. You never knew if there is going to be trouble during the Festival and the government wasn't one to take chances.

Farther down the road I found the parking and paid the one denarius fee letting me park there for the day. Getting out and locking the car, I began the first steps toward the arena. I was supposed to meet Julius in front of the arena. Julius was a bit of an odd child, he was always trying to rebel against his parents since they were such strong supporters of the government they named their own child after the emperor.

Looking through the crowd I caught a glimpse of a tall young man with hair that was such a bright shade of red it almost seemed to glow. His left ear had a total of six piercings, another on the right side of his nose, his tongue, and 2 in his lower lip. Like I said he was a bit of a weird kid but, he was also one of the nicest guys I've known.

Working my way through the crowd and trying not to run into people was a bit difficult at points but I finally made it to Julius. The moment I got to him he gave me a small but friendly hug. After the hug was over he looked around before asking me if I'd seen Azi yet.

I was about to answer him when a familiar pair of hands entered my peripheral vision, grabbed me by the shoulders, and spun me around, before I received my second hug in 30 seconds. It was Azi. She was petite and had long charcoal hair that was slightly

wavy but mostly straight. She was beautiful and she was my ex. I returned the hug affectionately, enjoying her closeness. I heard Julius cough under his breath next to me and I ended the embrace casually. It was obvious to everyone but Azi that I still had feelings for her, even though I pretended I moved on by flirting with other women.

Turning towards the entrance we made our way into the coliseum and found seats higher up to observe the spectacles in less detail than necessary. A few minutes after we found our seats a short fat man in neon purple pants and a deep purple shirt that was tucked in at the waist walked to the center of the grassy floor of the arena. He took his wireless microphone to his lips and said in a booming deep voice that echoed around the arena:

“Ladies and gentlemen! Boys and girls! Citizens of glorious Rome! Welcome to the opening events of the Festival! I shall be your announcer for these few spectacular days of honor and glory. Our first event of the evening shall feature the soldiers of the 32nd!” he made a gesture to a giant metal door to the left of the arena, “And rebels captured after a pathetic attempt on a supply caravan full of unarmed citizens,” he then made a gesture to the metal door on the right of the arena, “Ladies and gentlemen let the battles begin!” and with that final sentence the pudgy announcer left the field.

The moment he stepped off the field, barriers and walls with doorways sprang out of the ground creating the battlefield. The door on the left groaned open and the crowd erupted into cheers as the soldiers took up positions behind cover. The door to the right groaned this time and the rebels started to come out.

The crowd erupted into cheers and lewd shouts and curses directed at the rebels. It had begun. Many rumors spoke of that the rebels were left overs or ruled by descendants of Etruscan kings who had survived when Rome took them over and were out for

revenge for twenty-five hundred years.

Seconds after the rebel door opened and they poured out struggling desperately to reach defensive cover, a young rebel with red hair shining in the sun collapsed in a brief spray of blood as a bullet from a soldier's rifle took him in the right eye.

The crowd cheered louder. One of the soldiers thought the rebels were easy pickings and advanced carelessly abandoning all thoughts of cover. He walked into one of the rebels line of sight and took a burst to the chest and staggered back, then recovered and brought his rifle to shoulder, took aim, and killed the rebel who'd just gotten a clean shot on him. The empire gave the soldiers the best of equipment and a bulletproof vest while the rebels were near death.

The fact these men could think of a strategy and had enough resolve to fight back against these men despite almost no chance of survival, made them earn all of my respect. The apparent leader of the rebels had been crouched low and had run under the windows staying out of sight and snuck up behind two of the soldiers. He drew his pistol and took aim at the unprotected base of the skull of the two soldiers and took fire. Both soldiers dropped to the ground not knowing what happened.

During the attack however the rest of the rebel squad had been eliminated. Without their leader for direction and support they were easily taken out. On his own the rebel stood no chance and was soon laying face down in the dirt dead.

The next few hours were similar, soldiers against rebels in various battlefields. Some were filled with water or swamps, others desert. Sometimes a group of rebels were faced against a pair of wild animals. But one thing was always similar, the rebels died. They had disrespected the emperor chosen by God and for their actions had forfeited their right to life. That's how the emperor and most of the world saw it.

The arena part of the festival for today had come to an end so they could clean the arena of blood and anything else that didn't belong. The next part was thankfully optional and since I was still very sleepy, I decided not to go. I said a brief good bye to Julius and Azi before heading back home.

After finally reaching my front door and walking inside I let the weight of the day crash down upon my shoulders. Part of me felt like puking from the foulness of the day and the other half wanted to slip into sweet unconsciousness and drift away into dreams much sweeter than the reality of this "holiday". I walked into the living room, stripped down to my boxers, and set everything out on the couch so it was ready to just grab and wear tomorrow.

I went to my room and picked up my guitar and turned on the amp to volume 5. I stretched my arms briefly, grabbed my pick, and began my ritual as I always did after the festival. It started back when my parents were still alive. They often fought after a festival day but I could never pick up what they were always fighting about so passionately.

When I was six my parents had gotten me a guitar for Christmas. That following Festival I played my guitar for hours drowning out the sound of their arguments. That was the last festival I went with my parents, before they disappeared.

I started with older styled metal and transitioned into more hard rock. Two hours had nearly passed when I switched to a slow acoustic song I created myself over the years. When my ritual was complete, I set the guitar down and turned off the amp. I rose from the chair and stifled a yawn. Nearly naked and too exhausted to put on pajamas I slipped under the covers and closed my eyes and sleep came quickly.

I groaned and rolled over to silence the annoying buzzing sound coming from the dresser near my bed. I picked my phone up and looked at it. Four new text messages. All from Azi. I tapped

the screen opening my texts and read them disbelievingly.

Hey you up? I know you like to stay up till these kinds of times... that made me look at the clock, it was only 3:30am. The next few texts were much more interesting. Together they said I can't sleep and I remembered how you were always able to help me sleep no matter what was going on, and it got me thinking about how we used to be. I miss it.

I don't need an answer anytime soon but Zay I was wondering if you ever thought about getting back together? I know you might be mad about it but I talked to Julius about the whole thing and he has it in his funky head that you're still interested in me. I gotta sleep now or I'll sleep past the start of the Festival tomorrow and you know how bad that would be. I don't need a bag over my head in the night.

Good night Zay. See you tomorrow.

My life seemed to be taking a turn for the better, or so I thought. I went back to sleep and dreamt of Azi's smiling face for the rest of the night.