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TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.  
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

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*The Last Sacrifice*

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**The Library of Congress has cataloged the original edition as follows:**

Hanegraaff, Hank.

The last sacrifice / Hank Hanegraaff, Sigmund Brouwer.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8423-8441-4 (hc)

ISBN 978-0-8423-8442-1 (sc)

1. Bible. N.T. Revelation XIII—History of Biblical events—Fiction. 2. Church history—Primitive and early church, ca. 30-600—Fiction. 3. Rome—History—Nero, 54-68—Fiction. 4. End of the world—Fiction. I. Brouwer, Sigmund, date. II. Title. PS3608.A714L375 2005

813'.6—dc22

2005016381

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Repackage first published in 2012 under ISBN 978-1-4143-6498-8

Printed in the United States of America

18 17 16 15 14 13 12

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Prologue*

# ROME

*Capital of the Empire*



*They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.*

— REVELATION 12:11



☿ SUN ☿



## HORA OCTAVA

THE EARLY AFTERNOON sunshine blazed down on a large pen out of the sight of amphitheater spectators. The *bestiarius* began covering the eyes of the hobbled bull elephant he had selected to kill Gallus Sergius Vitas.

Perched on its neck, the beast master hummed as he did his work, patting the hide of the massive animal, trying to settle and soothe it. In his mind, he saw clearly how it would happen. He would remove the blinds only after he strapped Vitas to a tusk and led the beast to the center of the sand. Then, while two bears fought the elephant, another condemned man would be forced to dart between the elephant's legs to release the chains that kept it hobbled. After the bears had killed the condemned man, and after the elephant had killed the bears with Vitas still on its tusk, it would finally redirect its rage to shake and scrape Vitas loose, then stomp him into a red smear. The process would, with luck, entertain the crowd for half an hour.

It was routine, actually, except that the man who was to die today once had Nero's ear. So the *bestiarius* knew it needed to be done properly.

From below, a voice interrupted his thoughts: "Nero wants Vitas so close he can taste his blood."

The *bestiarius*, a small, dirty man with no teeth, secured the blinders and patted the animal's head before looking down to answer. At the side of the elephant, he saw the former slave most citizens in Rome recognized. Helius, Nero's most trusted adviser.

In his late twenties, Helius was a beautiful man, with smooth,

almost bronze skin. His hair was luxuriously curly, his eyes a strange yellow, giving him a feral look that was rumored to hold great attraction for Nero. Helius wore a toga edged with purple, and his fingers and wrists and neck were layered with jewelry of gold and rubies.

“Did you hear me?” Helius said, impatient. He sniffed the air cautiously and wrinkled his nose at the smell of the elephant.

The bestiarius would have answered any other man with derogative curses. “No man alive,” the bestiarius finally said, “can direct or predict the movements of a raging elephant.”

“Nor can any man dead,” Helius told him. “Make sure Nero is not disappointed.”

The bestiarius cautioned himself that this was Helius, who had almost as much power over the lives and deaths of Nero’s subjects as Nero himself. “I’ll have two women chained in the sand below the emperor’s place in the stands,” he said after a few moments’ thought. Once the bull was in a rage, he knew it would attack everything in sight, including those women. It would rear on hind legs and stomp with the full force of its weight, something that would surely excite Nero. The bestiarius would also strap Vitas on so tightly that the elephant would not be able to shake him loose too soon. That would bring Vitas in close enough to the emperor. “He will get the blood he wants.”

“Ensure that the women are Christians and see it’s done properly,” Helius snapped. “You don’t want me back here again.”



Nearby, but in a world removed from blue skies and fresh air, Gordio and Catus, the two soldiers assigned the task of finding and escorting Vitas, had already entered the labyrinth of prison cells below the stands of the amphitheater.

While both were large, Catus was the larger of the two. In the flickering light of the torch, they gave the appearance of brothers, each with dark, cropped hair, each with a wide face marked by battle scars. They were old for soldiers, sharing a common bond

back to the days when they were both recruited from neighboring farms north of Rome, sharing survived battles in Britannia and Gaul and all the years of monotony between them.

As they traveled through the dark corridors by torchlight, the rumbling of the spectators above sounded like growls of distant thunder. Each soldier had drenched his face and shoulders with inexpensive perfume to mask the odor; each knew from experience that no other smell on earth matched the stench of fear exuded by hundreds of prisoners.

The torch Gordio carried was a beacon to all the prisoners, a flame serving notice that yet another among them would be plucked away for a horrible fate outside on the sunbaked sand. Halfway to the cell that held Vitas, a woman thrust her arms between iron bars in a useless effort to grasp at Gordio and Catus.

“Kill me!” the woman sobbed at them, her hands flailing. “I beg you!”

Neither of the soldiers broke stride.

“Have mercy!” she wailed at their broad backs. “Give me a sword or a knife. I’ll do it myself!”

Behind them, the woman’s pleading blended with the yells and groans and swearing of all the other men and women in the dozens of crowded, dank cells along their route. To Gordio and Catus, the men and women they were sent to retrieve for death were less than animals, troublesome debris, criminals deserving of their sentences.

“My fate is tied to yours,” Catus growled to Gordio. “I want you to say it again. We are in this together.”

“Yes, my friend,” Gordio said. “We are in this together. How can you doubt me after all the years we have shared?”

The answer was unnecessary, for if ever there was a time for one to doubt the other, this was it. Nothing during their years as soldiers serving the empire had prepared them for what they had resolved to do next.

The unthinkable.

Treason.



The chosen seat of the man who had been born Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus placed him so close to the sand of the arena that on occasion blood would splatter his toga, spots of bright red soaking in and fading against the purple as they dried.

On this morning, slaves shaded and fanned him as he anticipated the death of Gallus Sergius Vitas. A ferocious hangover diminished some of his anticipation, and despite the efforts of the slaves, the heat irritated him. But not enough to drive him away before the death of Vitas.

He waited with a degree of impatience and swallowed constantly, trying to work moisture into his mouth. His thin blond hair failed to cover the beads of sweat on his scalp. He'd once been handsome, but closing on his thirtieth birthday, his face was already swollen from years of decadent wine and food, showing a chin that had doubled and was on the verge of trebling. His eyes were the most telling of the horrors he had inflicted on others during the previous decade—they had a dulled mania and an emptiness that bordered on eerie. Few dared to look fully into those eyes, and most shivered under their attention. For this was the man now known and worshiped by his subjects as Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus.

Nero did not sit alone in the spectators' box. To his right sat the boy Sporus, whose knee he touched casually; to his left, Helius, who had returned from the animal pens.

"How much longer until Vitas?" Nero said.

"Soon," Helius said. A pause. Nero's head throbbed as he concentrated on listening. Helius then spoke quietly. "Have you told Sporus about your intentions?"

Nero shifted, turning to face Helius fully. "You seem anxious for him to know."

"The arrangements were your request," Helius said. "What you want done is what you want done. But the doctors say it must be done soon, that any day now he will reach puberty."

Nero frowned. “It seems you take pleasure in the procedure. Why should it matter to you when Sporus learns of it?”

“I’m only thinking of him,” Helius said, looking down in deference. “Perhaps it would be best to give the boy time to prepare himself.”

Nero turned away and, to disapproving murmurs from the crowd, kissed Sporus. He pulled back and stroked the boy’s hair for a few moments, then leaned over and spoke again to Helius.

“Prepare himself?” Nero asked. “Are you suggesting Sporus won’t be delighted to honor me in such a manner? that there will be anything of more magnitude in his life than my love for him?”

“He lives for you,” Helius said. Another deferent look downward. “As does every subject in the empire.”

“Of course they live for me,” Nero said, feeling his irritation lessened by the obsequious reminder of his power. He allowed a smile, thinking again of Vitas suffering on the tusk of an elephant. “Unless I want them to die.”



“Gallus Sergius Vitas,” the soldier with the torch said to the prisoner. The soldier spoke quietly, compassionately, respectfully.

The prisoner knew his moment was upon him. He hoped that all his preparations for death would be enough.

He had been deliberate in thinking it through. During the long night of waiting, this grim contemplation had prevented him from wondering about the pain of his final moments, from wondering about the method of execution that Nero had chosen for him. Meticulous planning helped him maintain an illusion of control in a situation where all power had been taken from him. And most importantly, focusing on how he would face death dispelled the doubts that pressed at the edge of his consciousness like snakes trying to push beneath a locked door, insidious questions about the faith he’d staked his life upon and whether that faith would lead him to the eternity he believed was beyond.

“If this is my time,” the prisoner replied, his voice barely more than a croak, “let me prepare myself.”

Without waiting for an answer, he moved against the wall and squatted to void his body wastes in the darkness. This was the first thing he’d decided was necessary. Aside from whatever bravery he could find as he faced the beasts in the amphitheater, no other dignity would remain when his naked body became an offering of entertainment to be shredded for the delighted scrutiny of a crowd of thousands; at the very least he did not want his body to betray his fear.

When he finished, sadness crushed him so badly he could barely breathe. The moment had arrived, and the emotion he had expected was far greater than he believed possible for a man to bear. Not fear but sadness. Sadness not for his death but that he would never see his wife or children again. It took all of his focus to push that sadness aside. It was not time to allow it to fill him. Not yet.

“I am ready,” the prisoner said. He moved closer to the torch, its light hardly more than a blur to him.

Clanking told him the soldiers were opening the cell door.

The blur of the torchlight grew brighter, and he heard both soldiers gasp.

“His face,” one said.

The day before he had been beaten so badly that his eyes were puffed shut to the point that he could barely see. His bruised face felt like an overripe fruit about to burst.

“Jupiter!” the other said.

The prisoner gave a weak wave and repeated himself. “I am ready.”

“We are not,” the second one said.

They stepped into the cell.

Had Nero given orders for him to be beaten further? the prisoner wondered. He took a deep breath and offered no resistance as he waited for the first blow.

“His face,” the first again. “That will make it difficult for him.”

“No. It will help. All he has to do is reach the streets. His face will make it impossible to guess his identity once he has escaped.”

“Escape?” the prisoner said. Thirst made his throat dry, and he found it difficult to speak without a croak. “I . . . I don’t understand.”

“Nero has gone too far,” the first said, his voice soft but firm. “All of Rome knows you are here. And the injustice behind it.”

“The arena is where criminals die,” the second said. “Not military heroes.”

“We were not under your command in Britannia,” the first soldier continued. “But your reputation is enough for us. You do not deserve this fate.”

The prisoner felt something pressed into his hand. The handle of a sword?

“When the first line broke in the final battle against the Iceni,” the second said, “any other commander would have served politics first. Thrown away the lives of soldiers by sending them to defend immediately, without support. You risked your reputation because you refused to have them slaughtered. They owe you their lives. I, too, owe you. My brother was among them.”

“Some of them found a way for us to be here to repay you on their behalf,” the first said. “You are a man soldiers would follow if ever you decided . . .”

The second spoke when the first faltered. “The complaints about Nero grow every day. If a general stood up to him and sought the support of the legions . . .”

“I am not that man,” the prisoner said.

“No one will doubt that the legendary Gallus Sergius Vitas overpowered us,” the first soldier answered. “Strike us hard. Make certain we are injured badly enough to be believed.”

“I have my duty.” The prisoner thought of his wife. How his death would spare her. “Take me to the arena.”

“To die for the emperor who inflicted such an injustice upon you as this?” the first said. “Take my tunic. Leave here as a guard. When you are free, you can begin action against Nero. Or throw your support behind another general.”

“You must live,” the second urged. “His reign must end.”

“I have my duty,” the prisoner repeated. He lifted the sword. “Keep this.”

“At the least then,” the first soldier said, pushing the sword back at the prisoner, “spare yourself the horror and fall on this here. Or give us the honor of assisting you. We will end your life quickly and claim you attacked us.”

“No,” the prisoner said. He felt his legs grow weak. The sorrow again threatened to overwhelm him as images flashed into his mind. Of his younger boy as a toddler, rushing toward him to be comforted after stumbling on the bricks of the courtyard floor and scraping his knees. Of quiet summer evenings, intertwining his fingers with his wife’s, sharing dreams with her beneath the starlight. Of comforting his daughter one morning as she knelt on grass still wet with dew and wept over the death of a tiny bird found among the flowers.

The prisoner used all his resolve to force these images from his head. *Not yet*, he told himself. There would be a time for the memories. Soon enough. But not yet.

“Take me to the arena,” the prisoner said firmly. “I have my duty and you have yours.”



“I also need two women,” the bestiarius snapped at Catus and Gordio. “Go back and get them from the cells of Christians. And send someone to help me strap this man to the tusk.”

Neither soldier moved. The prisoner was behind them, head bowed, wrists shackled.

“Another thing.” The bestiarius shook his head. “The women? Cut out their tongues. I’m tired of the hymns these cursed Christians sing as they die.”

Still Catus and Gordio did not respond.

“Well?” the bestiarius demanded. Here he had near total authority. His skills with animals were seen as magical and very necessary

to the success of the entertainment. “I need the women immediately. Nero waits.”

Catus spoke. “You cannot strap such a man as Vitas to the elephant.”

“You tell me what I cannot do?” Still angry at how he’d been humbled by Helius, the bestiarius vented his frustration on the soldiers. “Don’t forget. You are expendable. I am not.”

“This man fought for Rome,” Catus said, pointing at the prisoner. “He helped defeat the Iceni. Led the triumph through the gates of the city. He deserves to die a soldier’s death. Give him combat against gladiators.”

The bestiarius spat, unswayed by the soldier’s passion. “I follow the orders of Nero. If you choose otherwise, expect to be strapped to the other tusk.”

“The crowd will know,” Gordio said. “He’s a hero. They will not tolerate it, no matter what Nero wants.”

The bestiarius stepped between them and clutched the prisoner’s hair, lifting his head and exposing his swollen, bruised face to the sun. “After a beating like this? No one will recognize him.” He dropped the prisoner’s head and yelled at the soldiers with surprising force for such a small man. “Now go! Get the women! And don’t forget to cut out their tongues.”



With the soldiers gone, the prisoner stood near the elephant, drawing deep, hard breaths.

So this was how he would die.

He drew the deep breaths to calm himself. This, too, he had calculated for this moment. He’d anticipated the renewed fear. But after his time in the stench of the cells, he’d guessed the fresh outdoor air would be as joyful to his body as clear, cold water.

The calm he had hoped for did not arrive. This was beyond his power.

“Christos,” he whispered. “Dear Christos. Let my death honor you.”

He lost himself in silent worship. Then suddenly his body seemed to come truly alive with every heave of his lungs, every sense totally engaged. The portion of the sky he could see beneath his swollen eyelids had never seemed so blue; sounds had never seemed so clear. A fly landed on his arm; he thrilled with the sensation of the tiny movements across his skin. The nearby elephant swished its tail, a sound that seemed as loud as a shout.

“Thank you, Christos,” he breathed. Yes! He was still alive; he wanted to drink in every sensation.

Doing so stretched each moment for him, and he was unaware of the passing of time. This amazing vibrancy lasted until rough hands grabbed and spun him, rough hands that belonged to men who were only a blur in his diminished vision. Until his body was lifted from the ground and held against the tusk of the elephant.

Men grunted as they strapped him in place. As his hands brushed against the tusk, he was startled to feel rough fissures in the ivory.

Strange, he thought. He'd always believed ivory was smooth. He puzzled about this, as if momentarily unaware of his body and the events happening to it. Ah, he realized, the only ivory he'd ever seen was carved and polished. Not still connected to a living beast. That explained it.

He became aware then of a different sort of movement. This new movement was the nervous swaying of the blinded elephant, unsure and nervous about the unfamiliar weight upon its tusk.

The prisoner was strapped in such a way that the sky filled his vision. It was interrupted by a flash of motion that he guessed at more than saw through the thin gap between his blood-crusting eyelids. A pigeon? He marveled that any creature could fly, as if he'd never seen a bird in the air before, and he regretted that he had never taken time or thoughts to observe the wonders of the commonplace that had surrounded him all his life.

The passing of the bird, however, reminded him of his daughter

holding the tiny dead sparrow in the garden, and thoughts of his wife and young children flooded his mind again.

*Not yet*, he pleaded with himself. Even filled with the joy of faith, he could not totally leave behind all that had been important to him on earth. *Not yet. Save those memories for the approach of death.*

That had been his plan. To use those precious memories to find a calmer place as the madness of the arena began to sweep him away. But in the quiet moments beneath the blue sky, so intimately joined to the elephant that its swaying was the mockery of a lullaby, he could not find the willpower to push away the thoughts of those he loved most on earth.

This, he decided, was what he would say to every father or mother: *Time gives the illusion that it passes slowly, and only in looking back do you see how quickly it moved. So cherish each moment with your children, for you never know how and why you might be taken from them or them from you.*

He found himself weeping. With joy for what he was about to gain in death. Yet in sorrow for what he was about to lose in life.



“The man you will see on the tusk of the elephant,” Catus told a crowd of men in the upper stands, “is Gallus Sergius Vitas. Surely you’ve heard why Caesar has him in the arena.”

Normally these members of the mob would have ignored a soldier, jeered at him. But Catus carried beer and was dispensing it to them as he spoke.

There were nods.

“Don’t you think,” Catus continued, “that such a man as Vitas deserves a chance to fight for his life? Especially if he is guilty of nothing more than defending his wife against Caesar?”

The men around him were half drunk already and bored because nothing had happened on the sand for a few minutes. Immediately a few shouted agreement.

Catus pressed coins into the hands of the nearest men. “Buy more beer,” he said. “And pass word of this injustice to those around you.”



The two women chained to the sand below Nero and Helius were kneeling in silent prayer, blood flowing from their mouths.

Helius ignored them; he was lost in reverie. With his enemy Vitas about to die, he was on the verge of simultaneously enjoying another enemy’s humiliation: Sporus. The boy whose knee Nero stroked with undisguised affection. Any moment now, Nero would deliver the news to the boy and . . . Helius shivered in delicious anticipation.

When the gates opened at the far side of the arena, however, Helius became instantly alert. Finally! Vitas, about to die! What joy!

The crowd noise abated briefly in anticipation of the drama to be provided next.

In this silence, the bestiarius prodded the bull elephant toward the center. It moved slowly, its front legs chained together. Well before it had reached the middle of the sand, a shout began in the upper stands, where the unruly mob always gathered.

“Let Vitas fight! Let Vitas fight!”

Spectators around Helius and Nero exchanged glances as they tried to decide what this meant. Exchanged glances became exchanged conversation as the news spread quickly around the amphitheater: This was Gallus Sergius Vitas! On the tusk! Where was honor in that? What an outrage!

The shouting was soon overwhelmed by boos, all of them directed at Nero.

Helius knew that if there was any one thing Nero could not control in the empire, it was the mob. He could influence it, bribe it, placate it, but never control it. Nero feared the mob; it was a beast as unpredictable and dangerous as himself.

Nero leaned into Helius. “Do I have a choice?”

Heliuss shook his head.

Nero stood, and all eyes of the thousands of spectators were upon him.

Bitterness filled Heliuss's stomach. How he wanted Vitas destroyed. He should have suggested to Nero that the man be poisoned. Or directed to empty his veins. But Heliuss had wanted to see Vitas humiliated in death. And this was the result. Yet another chance for Vitas to become a hero.

Nero raised his arms.

The crowd instantly quit chanting.

"Release that man!" Nero's voice echoed through the silence. "Let him fight!"



Catus and Gordio found a spot among the mob and looked downward in satisfaction. They'd bribed the bestiarius into sending out one of his least skilled gladiators—a *retiarius*.

Considered the lowest of gladiators, the *retiarius* fought with a net and a trident, a spear tipped with three points. His only piece of armor was the *galerus*, a piece of metal that protected his left shoulder. The method of fighting employed by a *retiarius* was simple—dart in and out, looking for a single moment to throw the net and attack.

Catus and Gordio were confident that Vitas, weakened as he might be from the beating, would still be able to handle an inexperienced *retiarius*.

Below them, on the opposite side of the amphitheater, musicians began to play the long, straight trumpets they would use to accompany the rhythm of the battle, their music intended to rise and fall in waves that heightened the drama.

On cue to the beginning strains of music, the *retiarius* ran onto the sand and squinted upward, as if judging the interest of the crowd. If he was looking for support he received none, as most were chanting the name of Vitas.

Then the prisoner stepped into sight. In the animal pens, he'd been removed from the tusk and hurriedly equipped for the battle.

Both soldiers frowned. They turned to each other and exchanged perplexed glances.

Something was wrong.



The will to live is an unreasoning creature.

The prisoner had spent hours in thought and prayer, finding the strength to face death. Now, with the chance to fight for his life, he could think of nothing except what it might be like to kneel again with his daughter and stroke her hair and hug her close. Or to run across open grass with his sons. Or fall asleep with his wife at his side.

He did not hear the roars of the crowd, feel the heat of the sun. He'd been given an honorable solution that might lead him back to his family. He would only face one opponent, and all it would take was a single fortunate blow for him to be declared victor. Yes, there were glory and joy in eternity with the Christos, but if it was the Father's will, perhaps he would be allowed more time on earth with his family.

So he gripped the handle of the sword and held out his shield as best he could.

His arms were weak, his legs sluggish. His eyes were swollen, and the weights of the sword and shield were unfamiliar to him. None of this mattered. At worst, he would die, but that was no worse than he'd expected, and his death would be merciful and quick, something he had not expected. At best, no matter how remote his chances of surviving, he would live. And see his family again. He was glad for the chance to fight for love.

He turned in slow circles, trying vainly to see his opponent through swollen eyelids. He held his sword in position, ready to swing at any flash of movement.

Then came the ragged breathing of his opponent closing in.

He staggered in one direction, then another, trying to get a glimpse of the retiarius.

His efforts were in vain. Far more quickly than he could dodge came the swoosh of net. It draped him completely, and he dropped his sword, clawing uselessly against the webbing. He felt the blow to his side, a body blow that knocked him onto his shield. The weight of a foot squeezed against the soft cartilage of his throat.

Dimly, he could see the outline of the man above him, a man with a trident poised to pierce his chest. A man waiting for the signal from Nero.

Hope of life on earth was gone. With its departure came the truest test of faith any man or woman could face—the specter of looming death.

He closed his eyes in prayer again. Joy returned to his soul. Yes, he would die but, in so doing, would give life to his wife and children, for their release from this same arena had been part of the bargain he'd made with a stranger the day before. He would die, but this close to the door to the other side, he fully sensed the presence of the Christos, even more than in his most joyful moments of worship. This was the truest and greatest hope, worth far more than death. And with prayer came peace, an outpouring of certainty that his faith was justified, and a full understanding that he would see his family again.

But not in this life.



Helius was surrounded once again by boos and catcalls from the crowd.

This time the mob's anger was directed not at Nero, but at Vitas.

The fight was over before it had begun. Within seconds, the retiarius had trapped Vitas in netting and knocked him over, and he now stood with one foot on his throat, ready to deliver the death blow. There'd been no entertainment, no rising up of the

hero against death. There'd barely even been time for the musicians to trumpet the macabre melody of battle.

The angry shouts grew louder as the retiarius gazed at Nero, waiting for a signal that would give him permission to dispatch his opponent.

This should have been a moment of joy for Helius. Vitas had been defeated, so humiliated that the crowd had turned against him.

Yet something was wrong.

*What is it? What is it?*

Then it hit Helius. *The shield!*

Vitas had been equipped with a visored helmet and a short sword. His thighs and torso were bare as was customary, and he wore a wide leather belt designed to protect the area below his waist. None of this was unusual, nor was the oval shield he'd been given.

What was unusual was how he held the shield.

For a moment, Helius wondered if he should alert Nero, but in that same moment, Helius understood the disastrous political implications if Nero realized the same thing. So Helius, too, remained silent and waited for Nero's decision, hoping Nero would suspect nothing.

With the eyes of all in the amphitheater upon him, Nero delayed his decision. He knew drama and when to prolong it.

Finally, Nero nodded.

The spear came down and the retiarius walked away, raising his arms in victory.

Helius could only close his eyes in stunned disbelief as the man on the sand bucked in his final moments of life, his blood soaking the sand below him.

What had gone wrong and how?

The matter with Sporus was suddenly utterly insignificant. Helius knew he should immediately rush from his seat and get to the penned area behind the spectators. He needed to examine the body of the dead man before it was thrown among all the other corpses.

Yet if he left now, Nero would certainly wonder why, and that, too, might raise dangerous questions. Helius had no choice but to pretend the same satisfaction that Nero showed in the death of Gallus Sergius Vitas.

Nero might believe it was over.

Yet Helius knew differently.

And again cursed the gods.

