

JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

RISE
OF THE
WOLF

· MARK OF THE THIEF ·

Book Two



SCHOLASTIC PRESS · NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nielsen, Jennifer A., author.

Rise of the wolf / Jennifer Nielsen. — First edition.

pages cm. — (Mark of the thief ; Book Two)

Summary: Now a driver in the chariot races, Nic is still a target of the Praetors because of the magical amulet he found, and they will do anything to get their hands on it — and meanwhile Atroxia is beginning to wake up.

ISBN 978-0-545-56204-1 (jacketed hardcover)

1. Magic — Juvenile fiction. 2. Amulets — Juvenile fiction. 3. Conspiracies — Juvenile fiction. 4. Dragons — Juvenile fiction. 5. Chariot racing — Juvenile fiction. 6. Rome — Antiquities — Juvenile fiction. 7. Rome — History — Empire, 30 B.C.-476 A.D. — Juvenile fiction. [1. Magic — Fiction. 2. Amulets — Fiction. 3. Conspiracies — Fiction. 4. Dragons — Fiction. 5. Chariot racing — Fiction. 6. Rome — History — Empire, 30 B.C.-476 A.D. — Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.N5672Ri 2016

813.6 — dc23

[Fic]

2015015920

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, February 2016

Book design by Christopher Stengel

A note to readers: Latin words will be italicized upon their first appearance in the text.

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My life no longer made sense. At least, not according to the usual rules of logic. But the absence of logic didn't bother me. A strange feeling of peace had come over me once I accepted that the only person I could trust in this world was also trying to kill me.

My grandfather, General Flavius Radulf.

Since he made no secret of his plans for my death, I didn't figure he had much of a reason to lie about anything else. Awful as his plans were, in some ways I was worse than him. Because he'd be a fool to trust me, and he knew nothing of my plans.

Though for now, those plans would have to wait. For, at the moment, the chariot I was driving required my full concentration.

Chariot racing had been Radulf's idea. He got the idea two months ago when he saw me riding the horse in the amphitheater. Back then, all I had cared about was surviving Rome's *venatio*, and I'd needed an obedient horse to do it. Competing in the chariot races one day had been the furthest thought from my mind.

Yet here I was, driving a team of four horses around the circuit for a practice race and loving every moment of it. Other teams were practicing too, which meant there were several hundred spectators in the audience, hoping for a good show. Hoping to see blood.

My blood, possibly. Because even in practice, I intended to win, and winning drivers always pressed toward the innermost track, where it was fastest, and most dangerous.

Although greens and blues, or even whites, were more popular, I rode as part of the red faction — Radulf had friends there. Since I was new and had an unfortunate reputation for destroying things, such as the great amphitheater, no other team would even consider me. I wasn't sure what it had cost Radulf in threats or bribery, but while on the track, I wore the red toga. A couple of other red teams were riding today, but they were already behind me.

With eight other teams, the track was crowded, but not as bad as it'd be during the circus, when twelve teams would race for glory, honor, and a small sack of gold. So I took advantage of the lesser numbers and pushed my team of horses inward. A white-cloaked charioteer just ahead glared back at me, and I smiled in return. If he was irritated, then I was doing something right.

Despite my relative inexperience, my practice races had all gone well, though I had yet to be tested in a real race. The *Ludi Romani* was coming up in a couple of weeks. It was the grandest of all festivals, honoring Jupiter, the highest of the gods, so most

Romans would attend at some point. I had to prove myself to be accepted there. If I worked hard to improve my skills, perhaps within a few years I'd be good enough for that race.

The chariot's reins were tied around my waist, which helped me control the horses more instinctively. That was fine, unless we overturned, in which case the horses would drag me to my death. I had a knife in my belt to cut free if necessary, though that wouldn't keep me from being trampled by other teams of horses. Trampling was hardly the way I intended to die, so I had to pay attention now. The man ahead of me shouted some sort of insult as I edged him farther out from the center of the track. Based on his expression, he'd be happy to see me fall. I had few friendships anywhere, but none in the circus.

The man's footing on the floor of his chariot was less secure than he wanted me to believe. I saw him fight for balance every time we made a turn. I didn't struggle with that as much. Back when I'd worked as a slave in the mines, my master, Sal, had often forced me onto steep and narrow paths. I hadn't fallen then, and I wouldn't fall now. Or that was my plan, anyway. The heavy bag hanging from my belt might change things.

I turned again, and the bag swung hard to the left, shifting my weight. My first instinct was to use magic to regain my balance, but I didn't. I couldn't. Once the chariot had straightened out, I reset my feet in the center of the chariot and rode on even harder.

Radulf had stolen my *bullā* after we fought in the amphitheater, which had taken that magic from me. But he hadn't taken

everything. Since our battle, the Divine Star on my shoulder had come to life in ways I'd never felt before. I rarely used the magic from that mark — I couldn't trust what Radulf would do if he knew I still had magic — so instead I contained it within me except for the smallest uses, such as comforting my horses. But never to correct my balance. That was far too risky.

“I saw what you did in the amphitheater!” a white-faction charioteer shouted as he tried to pass me. “Will you destroy the circus too if you lose?”

I smiled and urged my horses to block him. “Probably not, since I don't intend to lose!”

“Your chariot is too heavy with that bag. Stupid slave boy, the lead is worth nothing!”

Not to him, it wasn't. But things were different for me. The lead in this bag might save my life.

Romans were fiercely loyal to their preferred factions, possibly even more so than to the empire. Though it was illegal for other games, they often placed bets on the chariot races. To improve their team's chances of winning, they created curse tablets, lead slabs with curses scratched into them. Then they'd nail them to the wall of the circus or bury them in the dirt beneath the track. I collected as many as I could each day, and told Radulf that if the gods didn't see the curses, then the gods couldn't enforce them. It was a stupid lie, but I told it every single night, straight to his face.

Radulf hated that I wore the bag. We'd fought over it since the first day I brought it to the circus, but I didn't care and I

wouldn't give in. He'd become convinced that it was a superstition for me, which was far from the truth. There was no room in my life for superstitions. Reality was already dangerous enough.

"Carrying that bag around is ridiculous, and embarrassing for the grandson of a general," he'd said only last night. "Besides, the gods have already cursed you. What more could they possibly do?"

I knew the answer to that question. The gods could stop providing me with curse tablets each day.

Still shouting insults, the white-cloaked charioteer tried to force my team against the wall. I calmed the horses with a wave of my hand and urged them even faster, earning some cheers from the audience. I turned to thank the crowd, and then someone caught my attention.

My younger sister, Livia, was in the stands, behind the senators' box. Her golden curls always stood out in a crowd, and they did now, as bright as ever. Still, I was surprised to see her here. Since we had come to Radulf's house two months ago, she and I had never been allowed outside at the same time. Radulf thought it would make us more likely to run. I hadn't gotten far in arguing that with him, mostly because we both knew that's exactly what we'd do.

So why was Livia here now, and on her own? As my chariot came closer, she turned to speak to a woman next to her and I realized it wasn't Livia after all. But for the difference in their ages, it was someone who could have been her twin.

My heart lurched into my throat. Only one other person could look so much like Livia. That was my mother, I was sure of it.

“Control your horses or I’ll have you thrown off this track!” another charioteer shouted as he passed me by.

“What? Oh — sorry.” I shifted attention back to my horses, who had wandered into the outer track, and then I looked for the gates to pull out of the race. They were behind me, requiring almost a full circuit, so I kept an eye on my mother as much as possible while the next turn came closer.

I realized now that my mother wasn’t in conversation with the woman beside her — she was serving her. And looking at the track whenever she could. Did she recognize me and know I was down here? Or was it simple curiosity about the practice? Maybe the answer didn’t make any difference — after all, she couldn’t speak to me without the permission of her mistress. And with Radulf in the stands, it wasn’t a good idea for me to approach her either. But for the past five years, I hadn’t seen her once, or even known anything about her new life. There was no chance I would let her go now.

The white-cloaked charioteer had edged ahead of me and looked back, yelling, “This will teach you a lesson, boy!” And he steered his team of horses directly into mine, pushing us hard into the wall. My lead horse stumbled, and would take the others with him when he fell. Seven other chariots were behind me. At least one would trample me. Probably on purpose.

I glanced at where I had last seen Radulf, but couldn't see him any longer. Though it would require a greater use of magic to save the horses, it was a necessary risk. As the horses tangled with one another, I brushed my hand sideways, and they immediately regained their footing. It was a relief to release a portion of the magic bottled up inside me, a little less pressure to contain. On the other hand, if Radulf noticed what I'd just done, I would pay for this.

By then, I was able to pull off to the gates, and when I did, I used the knife to cut myself free from the chariot, removed my helmet, and leapt to the ground. While handlers took over the care of my horses, I sprinted off the track, dodging other horse teams when necessary. Then I ran up the stone steps into the stands, toward where my mother had been. But though my heart was pounding and I was completely out of breath, I hadn't been fast enough. I could not see her anymore, nor the woman she had served. Those seats were empty, and no matter how hard I looked, I could not see them anywhere. My mother was gone.