Swords of Rome

by Christopher Lee Buckner

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Hello readers,

The following is chapter Two of my Roman epic, Swords of Rome.

The book is available to buy on Amazon: A special limited time offer of $0.99 for Kindle readers, and $14.99 for print.

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I hope you enjoy this preview.

CHAPTER TWO

Gaius steadied his breathing to calm himself. He listened carefully as he stayed within the tall brown wheat that was almost ready for harvest. He couldn't hear anything save for the sounds of the wind as it blew across the seemingly endless field. A few geese flew overhead in perfect formation; their constant honking braking the pristine quiet momentarily as they passed high above. The only other sound was the thumping of his heart. And then, he heard a sudden rustling in the grass to his right.

Gaius held his breath as he gripped the hilt of his sword tighter, with the blade at the ready. After a few tense seconds the noise sounded again, nearer to his position; sweat dripped from his brow as he knelt on one knee.

He was as still as a cat ready to pounce its prey. No one could have seen him unless they stepped right on top of him. He had

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concealed himself well, as he had been trained. He hoped it would afford him an advantage over the man he had been eluding for several hours now.

His pursuer was good, and seemed determined to find him before the sun fell over the western sky, which was less than two hours from now. However, every time Gaius felt that he had lost him, the man showed his ugly face, having already chased him across this country with the aggression of a madman. It was a bitter rivalry that had been going on far too long. He wanted to find his hunter and defeat him, so he could be free. However, Gaius had a mission to complete that took priority over his own need for justice, so he waited patiently, looking for a way to circumvent his prey and reach his objective. But if he could achieve victory here, he would be free to carry out his duty without impediment.

The quiet rustling came again, nearer still. He readied his sword as rustling in the field was moments from revealing itself to him. Now he had the advantage and would do away with this villain.

“Got you!” Gaius cried out as he broke from her perch and dashed forward, parting the grass as he came out into a small clearing. His eyes opened wide as his sudden action startled a deer that had been chewing the weeds; its eye opening in a wide panic, frozen for a moment as it gazed at the frightful Roman. However, he did nothing as the deer took the opportunity and darted off quickly back the direction it had come.

Gaius took a deep breath and then letting it out with a sigh. His heart was pounding as the creature escaped, most certainly not the man that had tracked him for all these hours. His nerves were getting the best of him. He was tired of running. He needed to confront his pursuer now and deal with the villain before paranoia overtook him.

Wiping his brow with the sleeve of his shirt, he looked up at the bright overhead sun. In a few hours it would descend. Nightfall was not his ally as his mission was sensitive. He had only until the new-moon to finish it, which was drawing nearer.

He dared to rise a little bit. He could see a road not too far from his current position, which would take him to the compound that housed his objective.

My enemy might be watching the road, Gaius thought to himself as his tired mind pondered his options. *I've got to try. I would rather face my foe then continue to hide from him. If the Jupiter is with me, I might actually be able to ambush the tyrant.*

Staying as low as he could, Gaius carefully ran through the field towards a lone pine tree that stood on the outer edge of the dirt road. Stopping every few yards, he listened carefully for sounds that would indicate that he had been spotted. When he was certain he had remained undetected, he quickly raced over to the tree that loomed before him, well-concealed against the wide trunk of the century old pine, provided him with shade from the scorching heat of the sun.

Peering around its base to see if anyone was coming down the road, he saw no travelers. A part of him hoped that the hunter would be marching down the road so he may end this tiresome chase once and for all, but he saw no one.

Gaius felt a little more relaxed as he felt perhaps he had finally escaped the Greek who hunted him. He might now be able to complete the mission he had been given by his king, without having to fight his way to the prize, the wife of his brother Paris.

Determined that the way was clear, Gaius readied himself to break from the cover that hid him from prying eyes. As he prepared to dash out into the road he heard rustling of leaves above him. For a moment he thought it was a bird, nesting high within the thick branches, but then he heard a high-pitched scream, and knew that the sound was not that of birds.

Gaius barely managed to roll out of the path of his attacker as the man leaped down from the tree, plunging his sword into the dirt where Gaius had been standing.

Covered from head to toe in mud, Gaius rolled to his feet as the Greek quickly withdrew his sword and screamed like a wild animal, before attacking once again.

With a bloodlust in his eyes, he lunged forward in an attempt to impale Gaius with the thick blade of his curved sword. But just in time Gaius fainted to the right, dodging the Greek's violent attack. Before he was able to counter, however, the hunter swung upward with blinding speed.

Gaius backtracked, managing to stay on his feet as he slipped in the mud. He only now seemed to notice that the Greek warrior had dried mud on his arms and face, which was why he was able to hide in the tree, hidden within the shadows of the long branches — just waiting for him to make a mistake and drop his guard long enough to launch his surprise attack. A brilliant tactic he hated to admit.

The Greek warrior seemed to be the same age as Gaius, but two inches shorter. His build was slimmer and wiry, which gave him a slight edge when it came to speed, compared to the taller, more muscular Roman. Both men seemed equal with the blade in terms of their execution. However, Gaius was better trained and more controlled in his form, which allowed him to deflect each attack that came at him. The Greek was more violent and his more aggressive style made it difficult for Gaius to counter without considerable effort.

Gaius knew instinctively that if he kept this up for too long, the more crazed swordsman would overpower him. He needed a plan — enough time to take advantage of his attacker's weaknesses.

As Gaius blocked another powerful sword strike from the Greek, he noticed that the sun was starting to drop lower over the western sky. He didn't have much time left. His mission to save his brother's wife was too important to fail — for if he did, a kingdom would fall.

As his opponent leaped forward, Gaius rolled to his left. The Greek missed wide, which allowed Gaius to reach down and grab a fistful of mud, which he hurled at his attacker's face.

The Greek, already covered in dried mud, managed to raise his hand up in time to block the clump of dirt. But as he readied to attack once more, he saw that his target had fled, darting as quickly as he could across the road and back into the tall field.

“You coward!” the Greek warrior roared as he chased after Gaius, who disappeared before his eyes as the brown grass engulfed him.

Gaius ran as quickly as his tired legs could carry him. This country was his homeland — he had lived, worked and fought here that he knew it as well as his own hand. This he hoped would give him the advantage against the foreigner.

Quickly, Gaius ran around a large bolder that he knew stood several dozen yards down the side of the road. It was just barely large enough to conceal him from view, and perhaps provide the opportunity to set his own ambush.

Gripping his sword tightly, Gaius struggled to control his breathing as his heart raced. The chase had been exhilarating, despite being so near to death. A warrior was only at his peak when faced with his equal, or so he had been taught to believe. Only then could the true test of a warrior's mettle be proven, and if he survived, he would be greater for it.

Gaius heard the Greek approaching. The man no longer cared for stealth as he was slashing through the wheat with his blade.

“Show yourself you cowering girl!” The taunt might have worked in the past, but Gaius kept his nerve as he waited, ignoring the spiteful comments that the Greek bellowed.

As Gaius peeked over the top of the rock, planning to give the Greek what he was asking for, he steadied his breathing, opened his mind to his surroundings, and waited patiently.

Gaius felt a calming peace come over him. The kill was near, he knew, and soon he would be allowed to complete his mission and claim his reward from the honorable king — a prize that would make him a very rich and celebrated hero.

He readied as the Greek neared.

Gaius placed one hand around the hilt of his sword, while the other slowly inched over the top the of the rock, making sure he had a firm grip on the stone before leaping over; he couldn't afford to make any mistakes, not when he was so close.

The Greek turned abruptly as he heard Gaius' war cry, as he rose over the edge of the bolder and leaped with his sword held high over his head.

There was nothing the Greek warrior could do, he was completely defenseless, his eyes opening wide as he knew without a doubt that this would be the last thing he would ever see before the end came. However, death did not come as Gaius had planned. Instead of driving his sword through the Greek's chest, the mud that had yet to dry on his feed caused him to slip. There was nothing he could do as he fell, landing flat on his back, on the ground with a loud *thump.*

The Greek took advantage of the situation and ran forward. Gaius didn't have time to regain his footing before the sandaled heel of the Greek's foot crashed down onto his chest.

“A valiant effort my opponent, but alas it was a vain one. Now, you shall die,” the Greek yelled as he drove his sword through Gaius' stomach.

He screamed as the blade was driven through the soft flesh of his belly, twisting as it tore through his entrails. It was not a quick or painless death, but slow and agonizing as the villain laughed, enjoying his victory, at last.

Death was not what troubled Gaius as he breathed his last, as his thought drifted to his failure to complete his vital mission, knowing that the kingdom he had sworn to protect would fall to the foreign hordes. It was bitter knowledge, worse than the agony he was in now.

The world grew dark as death overtook him. Then, as the Greek roared his victory, Gaius left this world as a defeated hero, slain by his enemy, who would now claim the greatest prize in the known world.

However, darkness did not linger as his eyes opened once more, and his lungs filled with fresh air. He tried to stand back to his feet but could not as the foot of his murderer was still firmly planted on his chest, keeping him pinned to the ground.

“I, Achilles, have defeated the powerful and mighty Hector of Troy. I am now the greatest warrior on the face of the Earth! No man can stand in the path of the great Achilles!”

Gaius tried to stand to his feet, but the would-be-Achilles pushed him back down onto the muddy ground — the same wide grin still evident on his face as he turned his attention to someone else.

“Now I shall claim my prize, my queen, Helen of Troy,” Achilles said with a sinister smile as he stepped over Gaius' body, walking over to a girl that sat across the road, watching the whole ordeal with wide eyes and a bigger grin.

“Ewww!” the pretender who played the part of Helen of Troy cried out as she sat on the top of a wooden fence, swinging her legs back and forth.

“But you must marry me. I have defeated Hector for you,” Achilles said as he stood before the younger girl who looked disgusted by the thought of marrying the warrior who walked towards her — his arms held wide to his side as he knelt down on one knee, waiting for her to run into his embrace.

The uncooperative Helen leaped down from the fence. As she hurried over toward Achilles, she pushed him out of the way, which forced him down onto his backside before she hurried over to Gaius, who finally managed to get back to his feet, tying to brush the drying mud off from his tunic and bare legs.

Throwing her arms around Gaius, the girl looked back at Achilles, the boy who was actually her brother, and proclaimed, “I choose Gaius as my husband. He is my hero and I shall marry him!” she cried out as she looked up into Gaius' boyish eyes with a wide smile on her young face.

Her grip on his leg was firm, not caring about the dirt that stuck to his body, as long as she had him in her arms.

“Hey! You can't do that. He is supposed to be Hector. And he is dead!” the pretender that played Achilles yelled with a frustrated expression, bitter as he watched once again his sister ruin his game.

“And besides, Helen is supposed to be in love with Paris,” Gaius said as he looked down at the little girl.

“I can marry whoever I want!”

“No you can't, Julia!” Anthony, her older brother screamed. “You can't just go and change the story. Can't she, Gaius?”

Gaius looked down at Julia as she stared back up at him with her big, dark green eyes, seemingly asking him without words that he should agree with her and not her brother.

“It doesn't really matter, I guess. Pretty much everyone dies in the end,” Gaius answered as diplomatically as he could — setting the historical facts straight.

“Well, that isn't very fun. Why can't we just change it?” Julia asked.

“Because, it isn't our story to change,” he answered.

“Yeah, so strop trying to marry him already,” Anthony said as he walked over to his sister and smacked her upside her head. Julia turned, yelling at her brother as she started to swing at him.

Gaius looked on, watching his two friends as they fought, as they normally did. For the moment, he was thankful that he was the only child in the family.

As Anthony and his younger sister fought in the middle of the road, Gaius looked over his shoulder and gazed upon the falling sun, which in fewer than two hours would be gone, ending his day with his two best friends.

He sighed as he had to start his way home. If he didn't, his father would be angry with him. He still felt the effects of the last time he had made the mistake of getting back home after nightfall.

“I have to go home before it is too dark,” Gaius said, but he wasn't sure if his friends actually heard him, as Anthony, taller than his six year-old sister, was mocking her foolish attempts to beat him with her tiny fists.

Julia, while four years younger than her brother, held her own. She never backed down from a challenge, or let her brother bully her. So she would fight him, confront any attempt to demean her, especially when she was with Gaius. He figured that Julia felt she had to prove herself worthy to play with the boys, or risk being cast out if she should back down.

For all the talk and physical torment that Anthony committed against his sister, it was clear to Gaius that he loved and looked out for her as any good brother should. He simply wasn't accustomed to having to share his friends with a girl, who demanded daily to play with the two boys, namely because she desired to be around Gaius as much as she could.

Julia followed them day after day, like a little mascot as the two filled the afternoon with fantastical wonders, pretending to be warriors or acting out classical stories, as champions defending Greece from Troy, or the Persians, or battling the fearsome Cyclops, the Hydra, or the frightful snake-haired Medusa. On occasion the two found use for her, such as their need for a girl to play the part of Helen of Troy. But, stubbornly, Julia was always more interested in the here and now — being around Gaius, and preferring that she, not an alter ego, be the object of his affections.

He found her cute, to say the least. She was an adorable young lady, even though she was half his age. She had a small, dainty body, groomed to someday be a proper Roman woman. Her hair smelled of scented oils and was curled in strands around her bangs. Her nails were painted different colors almost every day as she was tended by a dozen slaves, all women who acted like second mothers. But Julia didn't care about being a girl, trapped in her physical limitations. She liked being around the boys and playing their games. It might have proven an issue if her father was around more, but he spent most of his time in the city. Her mother was gone as well, having died during childbirth when Julia was born. Perhaps that was, as Gaius figured, why the two rich children of a Roman senator found common interest with a simple farm boy, as Gaius had lost his mother as well.

“I have to go home,” Gaius called out again as he picked his wooden sword up off the ground; bashing it against the dirt road so he could dislodge some of the loose mud from the blade that meant to simulate a Roman *gladius*, the standard sword of Rome's infantry.

“I will walk with you,” Anthony replied quickly as he let go of his sister, who was pushing against him with all her might. The act

caused her to fall to the ground as Anthony turned and grabbed his own things that lay up against the fence; his wooden sword that was designed more in the fashion of a longer Greek blade made of cooper, a simple wool cloak and a small water skin.

“I will come as well,” Julia eagerly said as she picked herself up off of the ground, already forgetting her skirmish with her brother.

“No! You go home, Julia. And take these with you,” Anthony called out as he walked over and dropped his things into her arms.

“I want to come with you,” she demanded as she dropped the items to the ground.

“Julia! Take these and go home — Now!” Anthony demanded once more, harshly, as he picked his things up and again pushed them into her arms. However, she continued to refuse as she crossed her arms, not giving him an inch.

Gaius smiled as he shook his head. He knew he had to intervene if this matter was going to be resolved within the time he had. These two could argue for hours if they were allowed to continue without interruption.

“Go home, Julia. I promise you and I can play a game, just the two of us, tomorrow,” Gaius said calmly.

“Do you promise?” she asked.

“Have I ever broken a promise to you?”

She rushed over to Gaius and threw her arms around him, calling out, “I love you Gaius!” before she turned and hastily grabbed her brother's things and ran up the road, heading back in the direction of her own home. Technically, she was already home, as everything for miles in all directions was owned by their father.

“I guess you just need to know how to speak to women,” Anthony commented.

“Maybe we should walk her home, before you and I leave,” Gaius suggested.

“She will be fine. What could happen to her on my father's property?”

The land that was owned by Gaius' father wasn't anywhere close to the size of Anthony's. His land was simple, enough for a family to live on without due hardships. The property, as Gaius knew, had been reward given to his father after many faithful years of service to the republic. He had fought and nearly died in the last war that Rome fought with its oldest of enemies, the nation to the east, Carthage. Gaius did not the particulars of what happened, but his father had become a celebrated hero. For that, he was given this land, which now was overgrown with weeds, an unkempt field, and a home that was barely standing. Sometimes he was embarrassed to bring Anthony here as he came from a wealthy family who never knew what it was to want. The land that the two boys had played on was only the tip of Anthony's estate, which extended for thousands of square miles, and was attended to by five hundred slaves and workers, which tended to the fields, grounds and other profitable endeavors.

Anthony, however never said anything disrespectful about the state of Gaius' home. He always shred what was his, never asking for anything in return other than a good friend with whom he could act out their favorite adventures, such as the Battle of Troy, Hercules and his Twelve Trials, or Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia. Gaius had observed that Anthony had a hard time making friends because of his father's status within Rome, as one of its wealthiest citizens and leading members of the senate. Anthony knew plenty of boys who pretended to be his friend, but typically these friendships were born out of interest by the other boy's fathers, who sought influence and political or financial favors. Gaius, on the other hand, had no hidden agenda or dishonest intentions. As a result, while they had only known one another for little over a year, they had grown very close, almost brothers.

Julia on the other hand came along only a few months ago, when she was old enough to keep up with them. She was in a worse state than her brother. She had no friends to call her own, as most of her father's associates own daughters were either too old, or only had

sons. Regardless, she enjoyed more boyish games than what was typically expected of young ladies.

Once she joined the two in their frequent adventures, her affection for Gaius grew. She had an obvious crush on him, and for a time, it bothered him, given his none experience with girls. However, he grew to accept Julia's less than vague hints about her desire to marry him, even though both barely understood what the concept entailed. Ultimately, he grew to like her as much as he did Anthony — his extended family of a sort.

The two boys continued their play as they neared Gaius' home, as they pitted their wooden swords against one another in a running, uphill battle, as the sun was nearly below the western horizon.

Anthony pretended he was a great swordsman. He loved tales of the blade and often imagined he was a master with it. Honestly, he was just a boy and his skills extended only to basic thrust and poor blocks. Gaius on the other hand, while no master was more practiced. His father showed him years ago how to handle and properly wield a sword — how to respect the weapon and use it if need be to protect himself. Because of this, he held back when playing. He didn't want to hurt Anthony's feelings by winning each bout, but he wasn't going to lose them all either. He made sure to keep their victories and defeats about even, and along the way, he showed Anthony a few useful tricks to improve s own form. The gesture was appreciated and made their games all the more enjoyable.

“So, did I tell you that I was going into the city in a few days?” Anthony spoke as he thrust his sword high, which was easily parried by Gaius.

“*The city*? You are going to Rome?”

“Yes. And I was wondering if you would like to accompany me? It is the last day of the games, and there is to be a festival in honor of Jupiter. My father said I could bring a friend along, if I so choose. And who better than you?”

Gaius couldn't help but smile at Anthony's words. For as long as he could remember he had dreamt of going to Rome, the capital of

the republic — the greatest city on the face of the earth. It had always annoyed him greatly how close he lived to the city, yet had never been allowed to see Rome for himself.

“Yes, of course I would like to go. You know I do!” Gaius replied enthusiastically. “But…” a terrible thought suddenly entered his mind, which wiped the wide smile from his face.

“What is it?”

“My father — I would have to ask him, and I don't have to tell you what his feelings are about Rome,” Gaius answered, his voice filled with doubt.

“I am sure you can convince him, if you try. But, let me know by tomorrow, will you? Good day, Gaius.” Anthony patted Gaius on the shoulder as he turned and raced down the hill, heading back towards his father's lands; swinging at the overgrown weeds with his sword as his mind was still trapped in the body of classical heroes.

Gaius felt a knot begin to form in the pit of his stomach. The prospect of having to convince his father in letting him go was daunting, and as he neared his front door, he began running through his mind what words he would use that might better his chances. But none came to mind as he reached his house.

Gaius reached for the old and warn wooden handle that led into his home. He took a deep breath before he pulled down the latch and opened the door. He had just gotten home by the expected time, but as he entered he could clearly see that his father was nowhere in sight, which brought a faint sense of relief as he latched the door shut, and then putting his things by his bed, which was set against the far left corner of the small home.

Gaius scrunched his nose as he smelled what was cooking over the small fireplace directly in front of the door. A large cast-iron pot sat over the medium-burning flame. The contents inside: a brown gloppy mess, which he was all too familiar with eating over the past two years, was boiling over. He didn't wait for his father to come back before he reached on top of the fireplace and pulled down one of the two bowls and spoons that rested above.

Stirring the stew, which made him turn his head slightly from the smell, Gaius finally scooped out a large portion for and spooned it into his bowl, before walking over to the long table that sat on the opposite side of the room, and took one of the stools.

The stew smelled worse than it actually tasted, but after having to swallow the slop nearly every day for two years, since his mother's passing, he was beyond tolerant of it by now.

It was a shade of brown; thick and had a foul odor that reminded him of a dead rabbit he found last year behind the barn, which had been decomposing for a week. Inside there was cuts of rough beef, various vegetables and some other stuff he had never been able to identify, nor was he sure that he wanted to.

Gaius grabbed a hearty piece of bread, tearing it free from the loaf and dipped it into the bowl. As he took his first bite, as he always did, he plugged his nose with one hand, while scoping a spoonful into his mouth with the other. Then soon after, he poured himself a cup of water from a clay jug that sat in the center of the table, and gulped it down in one sitting, before pouring another cup. He repeated this process for the first five minutes, eating as quickly as he could, both because he was hungry, and out of nervousness about what he was going to say to his father when he returned. A part of him wished he might get to bed sooner so that he could avoid the conversation altogether. But he had promised Anthony that he would see what his father said about the subject of going to Rome.

Gaius heard the latch on the front door as his father stepped inside, carrying a stack full of logs in one arm, and a heavy iron axe in his other.

He glanced back at his father, Julius, as he set the logs down by the fire — sweat dripping down from his brow as he then walked over to the fireplace and readied his own bowl of stew.

Julius was a tall, muscular man, taller and bigger than most Roman men, which was contributed to the family's Gallic ancestry. He had tanned skin that glistened with perspiration. His hair, even though he had been out of the legions for going on eleven years, was still trimmed neatly, low and tight around the ears and neck. His left

eye was partly clouded, which obscured his vision, and while his exterior was rough, no one save for Gaius knew that inside, his body was failing him.

As he sat across from Gaius and shoved a spoonful of stew into his mouth, a number of deep scars that ran along his thick muscular arms shined neatly in the low flickering candlelight, symbols of the many battles he fought and lived through during his youth with the legions.

Julius moaned for a brief moment, a sound that Gaius was familiar with. He was in almost constant pain, with few days free from the daily torment. While it bothered him a great deal, he was not about to voice his discomfort to anyone beyond a few groans and moans. Gaius did not know what ailed him precisely, only that his continuing problems must have been the reason why he left the legions a decade earlier.

It was not uncommon for Julius to wake in the middle of the night, haunted by dreams of his past deeds and torments suffered. Two years prior Gaius' mother would have been there to calm him, but since her passing, things had only gotten worse.

A few nights ago, Gaius caught his father rummaging through the large footlocker that he kept under his bed. Inside was his gear, the effects and weapons of a Roman soldier. He noticed, as he watched him, hidden in the shadows of the moonless night that he seemed most interested in the crest that was engraved on the chest plate of his armor. Later, when he was certain his father was gone for the day, tending to the grounds, Gaius snuck a peek inside the footlocker and saw what his father had been staring at so intensely. The plate was engraved with an ivory wolf's head. The craftsmanship was beautiful, and it must have been worth a small fortune; enough, if sold, to rebuild the house and replant the fields, yet it remained locked away, carefully wrapped in a silk cloth.

Whatever it's meaning to his father, Gaius had yet to ask. Since then, ever so often, he would sneak another peek; rub his fingers over the extremely detailed image of the white wolf, and wonder what it must have been like for his father to have worn the armor

into battle. He would never dare ask him about his military past. Some mysterious were best kept under the bed.

Gaius put his spoon down before he took a deep breath, and then spoke.

“Father, I would like to ask you something.”

“What?” Julius asked with a grunt as he chewed.

“My friend, Anthony, has asked me to accompany him to Rome in two days. There is a festival in the city and he said that I could come, if you agreed.”

“Anthony?” Julius seemed to ponder the name for a moment before he spoke again. “That is Maximus Titus Varro' son?” he then asked as pulled out a small bone from between his teeth.

“Yes father. We are friends. We have been for some time now,” Gaius answered, knowing he had mentioned Anthony's name numerous times — A futile effort. He had better luck speaking to and getting a reaction from a stone wall.

Julius never raised his eyes from his food as he shoved another hefty spoonful into his mouth before he answered, scraping the bowl clean as he spoke.

“No. There is too much work that is needed around here for you to run off and play in the city.”

“But father...I can do all my chores before I leave. And besides, I won't be gone longer than a day and half, two days maximum. I promise,” Gaius pleaded as he moved his still full bowl aside, and stared at his father, who hardly acknowledged what he was asking.

“Rome is not a place for a boy of your age, Gaius.”

“But father, I will be thirteen in two months — almost a man. And I won't be alone. Anthony's slaves will be with us the entire time, and his father as well.”

Julius finally looked up and stared long and hard, clearly growing frustrated by his son's unwillingness to drop the matter, even though he already given his answer.

“I said no, and that is final, Gaius. I will hear no more on this subject. Is that understood?” He waited for Gaius to answer, which he did after a long pause. “Yes father.”

There was an awkward break between the father and son as Julius stared at Gaius in silence for a moment longer, watching him swirling his spoon around the edges of the stew, clearly disappointed, but not seemingly expecting otherwise.

“And besides, I need you here.”

“Of course, father,” Gaius added before his father was finished speaking.

“There is someone coming in a few days — someone that I want you to meet. It is important that you be here.”

“Who is coming, father?” Gaius asked, just a little bit curious, but not enough to really care as he kept his head low, still playing with his food as his disappointed thoughts drifted endlessly. He wasn't looking forward to telling Anthony that he couldn't go with him to Rome.

“He is an old friend of mine. He has come a very long way, just to see you,” Julius finished.

“Me? Why?” Gaius' interest was finally piqued as he looked up at his father, waiting for him to answer. However, Julius sat still for a long while, seemly contemplating what he was going to say.

“Because...” The two were silent for nearly a full minute as Julius froze before he could complete his sentence. There was much that he seemed to want to say as he gazed into Gaius' eyes, but for some reason he held his tongue and returned to the previous subject.

“A day and half, you say, maybe two?”

Gaius' eyes opened wider with the sudden, unexpected words that seemly flew out from his father's mouth.

“Yes father. I would be back by week's end, just after midday. I promise!”

“Rome is a dangerous place. I expect you to keep that in mind and return home once this festival has ended. I will hold Varro responsible if you do not. Is that understood, Gaius?”

Gaius did not need to answer as he leaped from his stool and ran over to his father, throwing his arms around him, hugging him with all his might that his small arms could manage.

“Oh thank you, father. I promise that I will do double my normal chores before I leave,” Gaius said enthusiastically while still holding onto his father.

“That you will, boy. You had better finish eating and get yourself to bed, so you may start bright and early.”

“Of course father. I will!” But sleep would be allusive for Gaius for the next two nights, as his thoughts would be focused on the wonders and sights he was bound to see. Never did forty-eight hours seem so far away.