

Chapter 1

“They what?”

Cassius’s heart stopped as his father glared at his muddy, torn tunic and then slowly, very slowly, the man’s glare climbed up to the boy’s face. It always scared him when his father’s face got this red and angry, like the night he beat his mother because she disobeyed him. Tears collected. Cassius blinked to keep them hidden. His papa didn’t like crybabies.

“Ste-Stephiano s-shoved me in a p-puddle. And...and stuck my face in the m-mud.” Once they started, the words came easier. “He said...if I ever come back...on their lands, he’ll...he’ll really...hurt me.”

His father set hard fists on his hips. He was shorter than most men, but was twice as thick. Yet, at moments like this, he seemed as big as Poseidon’s sea monster, the Kraken. “That is our land, boy. But what in Hades were you doing there?”

Cassius didn’t dare tell his father that he had disobeyed him and had ridden Nikitas when he wasn’t supposed to. Nor that he’d fondled Stephiano’s sister to find out why his father enjoyed doing that to the slave girls. When Stephania screamed, within seconds, her brothers had appeared out of nowhere.

“I wasn’t doing n-nothing, Papa. Nothing. I...I was only trying to catch rabbits. For dinner. You know, hunting...for rabbits...for dinner.”

Cassius started breathing again when his father stormed across the atrium, flinging his arms to the ceiling.

“Fucking plebes! They all think they’re equal to us. The gods have willed it.” His father halted and wheeled about. “Cassius Julius Gullus.”

Terror sliced through the boy’s insides at the sound of his full name. Every muscle

turned to stone as his father marched back across the room with a finger pointed directly him.

“I expect you to see that no plebe ever shoves your face in mud ever again. You hear me?” His father halted close enough for the man’s finger to draw Cassius’s eyes together. His voice dropped dangerously low as did his bushy eyebrows. “And you *will see* to it that this plebe grovels at your feet. Am I clear?”

Cassius nodded vigorously, even as urine leaked into his loincloth. “I will, Papa. I will. I’ll make him...eat shit.”

The finger withdrew into a fist. “No one humiliates or disrespects the house of Cassius Julius Gullus.” The hand dropped to his father’s side. “Don’t you forget that. Because I won’t.”

For what seemed an eternity, his father just stood there, glaring down on the boy as if to drill the command deeper, and then he wheeled about to disappear into the garden. A vast wall loomed where the man had been standing. Cassius backed away as if the impenetrable wall still remained.

How could he make Stephiana and her brothers “eat shit” he wondered. After all, Stephiana’s oldest brother Stephiano was fourteen, six years older than he was. The middle brothers were twelve and ten. Stephiana and her twin brother, the youngest Stephiano, were eight years old like he was.

Cassius wished he could cut them all into pieces and throw them in the well. Or...or order Papa’s soldiers to destroy everything the Stephiano family rented. But his father would never approve of destroying anything he owned.

He studied the slaves standing along the walls, eyes cast downward, hands clasped

before them. None of them would tell him what to do. They were all dumb anyway.

Desperation rose like sharp thorns, tearing at his insides. Nobody listened to him anyway. He was nothing but a stupid boy who had to teach a bunch of plebes a lesson to not mess with patricians. And if he didn't, his father would beat him as he had beaten his mother.

If his mother had been there, everything would be all right. He ground his fists around his eye sockets to press the reemerging tears back where they belonged. Why did she have to run away?

He studied his personal slave standing beside a bedroom door. Lumar had kept his hand over Stephiana's mouth, grinning as she squirmed. But the stupid girl had bit him, and the slave let her scream. So, this was his fault.

Cassius crossed the atrium and slapped Lumar across the face. Hearing the slave cry out excited him. He hit Lumar again. And again, until the boy fell to the floor and curled up like a baby. Delight thrilled through Cassius's veins. Maybe this was why his father beat the slaves so often. He considered using the lash but didn't know where it was. So instead, he just kicked the slave in the ribs and went on into the bedroom.