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Emperor: The Gods of War

Written by Conn Iggulden

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PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE



Pompey pronounced each word as a hammer blow. ‘Therefore, by his actions, Caesar is today declared Enemy of Rome. His titles and honours are revoked. His right to command legions is struck from the records. His life is forfeit. It will be war.’

The senate chamber was finally still after the storms of debate, the tension showing in every face. The messengers who had killed horses to reach them had no way of knowing the pace of those who followed. The Rubicon line had been crossed and the legions of Gaul were racing south.

Pompey had aged visibly over two days of strain, yet he stood before them with a straight back, his experience giving him the strength to dominate the room. He watched as the senators slowly lost their frozen expressions and saw dozens of them meet each other’s eyes in private communication. There were many there who still blamed Pompey for the chaos in the city three years before. It had been his legion that failed to maintain order then and his dictatorship that had arisen from that

conflict. He knew there were more than a few voices muttering for him to put aside the position and elect consuls once again. The very building in which they sat was a constant reminder, with its smell of fresh lime and wood. The ashes of the old site had been cleared, but the foundations remained as a mute testament to the destruction and rioting in the city.

In the silence, Pompey wondered whom he could trust in the struggle. Who amongst them had the strength he needed? He had no illusions. Julius was coming south with four veteran legions and there was nothing in Rome to stand against them. In just a few days, the commander of Gaul would be hammering at the gates of the city and some of the men before Pompey would clamour to let him in.

‘There are hard choices to be made, gentlemen,’ he said.

They watched him closely, judging his strength, his weaknesses. One slip, he knew, and they would tear him apart. He would not give them the chance.

‘I have legions in Greece who have not been infected by the enthusiasms of the mob in Rome. Though there may be traitors in this city, the rule of law has not lost its voice in our dominions.’

How closely he watched them then to see who looked away, but every eye was on him.

‘Gentlemen, there is no other option but to leave Rome for Greece and gather our armies there. At present, the bulk of Caesar’s forces remain in Gaul. Once they join him, the whole country could fall before we have a sufficient presence in the field. I do not wish to lose a race to reinforce. Better to be certain and go to our armies. There are ten legions in Greece waiting for the call to defend against this traitor. We must not disappoint them.’

‘If he remains in our city, we will return to tear him out, exactly as Cornelius Sulla did to his uncle. The battle must be joined with him. He has made that clear by ignoring the lawful

orders of this Senate. There can be no agreements, no peace while he lives. Rome cannot have two masters and I will *not* allow a rogue general to destroy what we have all built here.'

Pompey's voice softened slightly and he leaned forward on the rostrum, the smell of wax and oil strong in his nostrils.

'If, through our weakness, he is allowed to live, to triumph, then every general we send out from Rome will wonder if he cannot do the same. If Caesar is not crushed, this city will never know peace again. What we have built will be worn down by constant war over generations until there is *nothing* left to show that we were once here under the eyes of the gods, and that we stood for order. I defy the man who would steal it from us. I defy him and I will see him dead.'

Many of them were on their feet, their eyes bright. Pompey barely looked at those he despised, men filled more with air than courage. The Senate had never been short of speakers, but the rostrum was his.

'My legion is not up to strength and only a fool would deny the value of the battles in Gaul to his men. Even with the guards from the road forts, we do not have sufficient force to guarantee a victory. Do not think I enter into this lightly. I greet the news with pain and anger, but I will not scorn him from our gates and then lose my city under me.'

He paused and waved his hand lightly at those who had risen. Confused, they sat down, frowning.

'When he comes, he will find this senate house empty, with the doors broken from their hinges.'

He waited through the uproar as they understood at last that he did not intend to leave alone.

'With his legions raping your wives and daughters, how many of you will stand against him if you are left behind? He will come in looking for blood and will find nothing! We are the government, the heart of the city. Where we are, is Rome. He will be nothing more than a ruthless invader without you

to put the seal of law on his words and actions. We must deny him our legitimacy.'

'The people will think . . .' someone began from the back.

Pompey shouted over the voice, 'The people will endure him as they have endured all their history! Do you think it would be better to leave you here while I gather an army on my own? How long would you last under torture, Marcellus? Or any of you? This Senate would be his and the final barrier would be overcome.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Pompey saw the orator Cicero rise and suppressed his irritation. The senators looked at the small figure and then at Pompey, seeing him hesitate. Cicero spoke before he too could be waved down.

'You have said little of the communications we sent to Caesar. Why have we not discussed his offer to halt?'

Pompey frowned at the nodding heads around him. He sensed they would not stand for a blustering answer.

'His terms were unacceptable, Cicero, as he knew they would be. He seeks to drive a wedge between us with his promises. Do you really believe he will end his drive south simply because I have left the city? You do not know him.'

Cicero folded his arms across his narrow chest, raising one hand until he could stroke the skin of his throat.

'Perhaps, though this is the place to debate the issue. Better to have it out in the open than leave it to be discussed in private. Have you responded to his offer, Pompey? I recall you said you would answer him.'

The two men locked gazes and Pompey gripped the rostrum more tightly as he struggled not to lose patience. Cicero was a subtle man, but Pompey had hoped he could depend on him.

'I have done everything I said I would. I wrote under senate seal to demand he return to Gaul. I will not negotiate while his legions are within striking distance of my city and he knows it. His words are simply to confuse us and cause delay. They mean nothing.'

Cicero raised his head. 'I agree, Pompey, though I believe all information should be made available to us here.' Choosing not to see Pompey's surprise, Cicero turned his head to address the senators on the benches around him. 'I do wonder if we are discussing a Roman general or another Hannibal who will be satisfied with nothing less than power torn from our hands. What right does Caesar have to demand that Pompey leave the city? Do we now negotiate with invaders? We are the government of Rome and we are threatened by a mad dog, leading armies we trained and created. Do not underestimate the danger in this. I concur with Pompey. Though it will hurt worse than anything we have suffered before, we must retreat to gather loyal forces in Greece. The rule of law must not bend for the whims of our generals, or we are no more than another tribe of savages.'

Cicero sat down, after meeting Pompey's eyes with a brief flicker of amusement. His support would sway a number of the weaker ones in the chamber and Pompey inclined his head in silent thanks.

'There is no time for lengthy debate, gentlemen,' Pompey said. 'Another day will change nothing except to bring Caesar closer. I move we vote now and plan accordingly.'

Under Pompey's stern eye, there was little chance of rebellion, as he had intended. One by one, the senators rose to show their support, and no one dared abstain. At last, Pompey nodded, satisfied.

'Alert your households and plan for a journey. I have recalled all the soldiers in Caesar's path to the city. They will be here to help man the fleet and arrange our departure.'

The sun shone on the back of Julius' neck as he sat on a fallen tree in the middle of a wheatfield. Wherever he looked, he could see dark patches of his men as they rested amongst the

golden crops and ate cold meat and vegetables. Cooking fires had been forbidden as they crossed into the lowlands of Etruria. The wheat was dry and rough to the touch and a single spark could send sheets of flame racing across the fields. Julius almost smiled at the peaceful scene. Fifteen thousand of the most experienced soldiers in the world and he could hear them laughing and singing like children. It was a strange thing to be there, out in the open. He could hear the calls of birds he had known as a boy and when he reached down and took a little of the leaf mulch in his hand, he was home.

‘It is a fine thing to be here,’ he said to Octavian. ‘Can you feel it? I’d almost forgotten what it is like to be on my own land, surrounded by my people. Can you hear them sing? You should learn the words, lad. They’d be honoured to teach them to you.’

Slowly, Julius rubbed the damp leaves together in his hand and let them fall. The soldiers of the Tenth reached a chorus, their voices soaring over the fields.

‘I heard that song from the men who followed Marius, years ago,’ he said. ‘These things seem to survive somehow.’

Octavian looked at his general, tilting his head as he assessed his mood. ‘I feel it. This is home,’ he said.

Julius smiled. ‘I haven’t been this close to the city in ten years. But I can sense her on the horizon. I swear I can.’ He raised his hand and pointed over the low hills, heavy with wheat. ‘Over there, waiting for us. Fearing us perhaps, while Pompey threatens and blusters.’

His eyes grew cold as the last words were spoken. He would have continued, but Brutus rode up through the crops, leaving a snaking path behind him. Julius rose to his feet and they clasped hands.

‘The scouts report eleven cohorts, maybe twelve,’ Brutus said.

Julius’ mouth twisted irritably. Every legion post and road fort had been cleared before them as they moved south. His march had shaken them free like ripe fruit and now they were

within reach. Whatever their quality, six thousand men were too many to leave at his back.

‘They’ve gathered in Corfinium,’ Brutus continued. ‘The town looks like someone kicked a wasp nest. Either they know we’re close, or they’re getting ready to move back to Rome.’

Julius glanced around him, noticing how many in earshot were sitting up and listening, anticipating his order. The thought of unleashing them on Roman soldiers was almost a blasphemy.

Pompey had done well to recall the guards. They would do more good on the walls of Rome than wasted against the Gaul veterans. Julius knew he should strike fast to blood the campaign and seal the decision made on the banks of the Rubicon. Brutus shifted at the delay, but Julius still did not speak, staring into nothing. The men in Corfinium were inexperienced. It would be a slaughter.

‘The numbers are accurate?’ Julius said, softly.

Brutus shrugged. ‘As far as they can be. I didn’t let the scouts risk being seen, but it’s clear ground. There’s no ambush. I’d say these are the only soldiers between us and Rome. And we can take these. The gods know we have enough experience breaking into towns.’

Julius looked up as Domitius and Ciro came out of the wheat with Regulus. Mark Antony was only a short way behind them and he felt the pressure to give the orders to spill Roman blood on Roman land. Once those first lives were taken, every loyal hand would be raised against him. Every legion would swear vengeance unto death against his name. The civil war would be a test of strength and numbers that he could very well lose. His mind searched feverishly and he wiped sweat from his forehead.

‘If we kill them, we will destroy any hope of peace in the future,’ he said, slowly. Domitius and Brutus exchanged a quick glance as Julius went on, testing the thoughts aloud. ‘We need . . . guile, as well as a strong arm, against our people.’

We need to win their loyalty, and that cannot be accomplished by killing men who love Rome as I do.'

'They won't let us through, Julius,' Brutus said, colouring with irritation. 'Would you, if an army wanted a path to your city? They'll fight just to slow us down; you know they will.'

Julius frowned with the anger that was always close to the surface. 'These are our own, Brutus. It is no small thing to be talking of killing them. Not for me.'

'That decision was made when we crossed the river and came south,' Brutus replied, refusing to back down. 'You knew the price then. Or will you go alone and give yourself up to Pompey?'

Some of those who listened winced at his tone. Ciro shifted his massive shoulders, his anger showing. Brutus ignored them all, his gaze fixed on his general.

'If you stop now, Julius, we are *all* dead men. Pompey won't forget we threatened the city. You know it. He'd follow us back to Britain if he had to.' He looked into Julius' eyes and, for a moment, his voice shook. 'Now don't you let me down. I've come this far with you. We have to see it through.'

Julius returned the pleading gaze in silence before placing his hand on Brutus' shoulder. 'I am *home*, Brutus. If it sticks in my throat to kill men of my own city, would you begrudge me my doubts?'

'What choice do you have?' Brutus replied.

Julius began to pace up and down amongst the crushed wheat. 'If I take power . . .' He froze for a moment as the idea formed, and spoke faster. 'What if I declare Pompey's dictatorship to be illegal? I could enter Rome to restore the Republic then. *That* is how they must see me. Adàn! Where are you?' he called across the field. His Spanish scribe came at the run. 'Here is your answer, Brutus,' Julius said, his eyes gleaming. 'Adàn? I want a letter sent to every Roman commander. It is ten years since I was consul; there is no bar against me standing once more. Tell them . . . I reject the dictatorship that Pompey will not end.'

Julius watched impatiently as Adàn fussed with his writing tablets.

‘Let them know I will respect the courts and the senate building, that Pompey alone is my enemy. Tell them that I will welcome any man who wishes to join me as we bring back the Republic of Marius and the security of the past. I carry the gold of Gaul with me and Rome will be reborn with what I have won for her.

‘Tell them all that, Adàn. Let them know that I will not take Roman lives unless I am forced, that I will honour the traditions as Pompey has not. He is the one who had the senate house burnt on his watch. The gods have already shown their dislike of *him*.’

The men around him watched bemused as Julius laughed aloud. He shook his head at their expressions.

‘They will want to believe in me, gentlemen. They will hesitate and wonder if I am a champion of the old liberties.’

‘And will it be true?’ Adàn asked softly.

Julius glanced sharply at him. ‘If I make it so. My first act will be in Corfinium. If they will surrender to me, I will spare them all, if only to have them spread the word.’

His humour was infectious and Adàn smiled as he scribbled in the soft wax, ignoring the inner voice that mocked how easily he fell under the man’s charm.

‘They won’t surrender,’ Domitius said. ‘Pompey would have them killed as traitors. You saw what he did to the Tenth for turning.’

Julius frowned. ‘He may, though if he does, he will be helping me. Who would you follow, Domi? A man who stands for law and consul, who frees good Romans, or one who has them killed? Who is the better man to lead Rome?’

Domitius nodded slowly and Julius smiled.

‘You see? It will be hard for them to condemn me if I am merciful. It will confound them, Domi. Pompey will not know how to react.’

Julius turned to Brutus, his face alight with the old energy.

‘But first we must take the road guards and do it without bloodshed. They must be reduced to a level of panic so total that they will not have the chance to fight. Who leads them?’

Brutus frowned, still reeling from the sudden change in Julius’ mood. The march south had been overshadowed by doubt and gloom, but in a moment Julius was as he had been in Gaul. It was frightening.

‘The scouts saw no legion flags,’ he said stiffly. ‘Whoever it is will be a ranking officer.’

‘Let us hope he is still ambitious,’ Julius replied. ‘It will be easier if we can tempt his guards from the town. I’ll draw him out with the Tenth and see if he comes. If we can catch them in the fields, they’re ours.’

All around them, those who could hear were getting to their feet, gathering their kit and readying themselves to move. An air of long-familiar tension stole over them all as they prepared themselves to go back to danger and hardship.

‘I will take the Tenth closer to the town, Brutus. You have overall command of the others. We will spin these lads until they’re blind and useless. Send your scouts out and this time let them be seen.’

‘I’d rather be the bait,’ Brutus said.

Julius blinked for a moment, then shook his head. ‘Not this time. The *extraordinarii* will be the links between us. I’ll need you back here fast enough if we are attacked.’

‘What if they sit tight?’ Domitius asked, glancing at Brutus’ strained expression.

Julius shrugged. ‘Then we surround them and offer terms. One way or another, I am beginning my run for consul and Rome. Spread the word amongst the men. These are our people, gentlemen. They will be treated with respect.’