

Emperor: The Field of Swords

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CHAPTER ONE



Julius stood by the open window, gazing out over Spanish hills. The setting sun splashed gold along a distant crest so that it seemed to hang in the air unsupported, a vein of light in the distance. Behind him, the murmur of conversation rose and fell without interrupting his thoughts. He could smell honeysuckle on the breeze and the touch of it in his nostrils made his own rank sweat even more pungent as the delicate fragrance shifted in the air and was gone.

It had been a long day. When he pressed a hand against his eyes, he could feel a surge of exhaustion rise in him like dark water. The voices in the campaign room mingled with the creak of chairs and the rustle of maps. How many hundreds of evenings had he spent on the upper floor of the fort with those men? The routine had become a comfort for them all at the end of a day and even when there was nothing to discuss, they still gathered in the campaign rooms to drink and talk. It kept Rome alive in their minds and at times they could

almost forget that they had not seen their home for more than four years.

At first, Julius had embraced the problems of the regions and hardly thought of Rome for months at a time. The days had flown as he rose and slept with the sun and the Tenth made towns in the wilderness. On the coast, Valentia had been transformed with lime and wood and paint until it was almost a new city veneered over the old. They had laid roads to chain the land and bridges that opened the wild hills to settlers. Julius had worked with a frenetic, twitching energy in those first years, using exhaustion like a drug to force away his memories. Then he would sleep and Cornelia would come to him. Those were the nights when he would leave his sweat-soaked bed and ride out to the watch posts, appearing out of the darkness unannounced until the Tenth were as nervous and tired as he was himself.

As if to mock his indifference, his engineers had found gold in two new seams, richer than any they had known before. The yellow metal had its own allure and when Julius had seen the first haul spilled out of a cloth onto his desk, he had looked at it with hatred for what it represented. He had come to Spain with nothing, but the ground gave up its secrets and with the wealth came the tug of the old city and the life he had almost forgotten.

He sighed at the thought. Spain was such a treasure house it would be difficult to leave her, but part of him knew he could not lose himself there for much longer. Life was too precious to be wasted, and too short.

The room was warm with the press of bodies. The maps of the new mines were stretched out on low tables, held by weights. Julius could hear Renius arguing with Brutus and the low cadence of Domitius chuckling. Only the giant Ciro was silent. Yet even those who spoke were marking time until Julius joined them. They were good men. Each one of them had stood with

him against enemies and through grief and there were times when Julius could imagine how it might have been to cross the world with them. They were men to walk a finer path than to be forgotten in Spain and Julius could not bear the sympathy he saw in their eyes. He knew he deserved only contempt for having brought them to that place and buried himself in petty work.

If Cornelia had lived, he would have taken her with him to Spain. It would have been a new start, far away from the intrigues of the city. He bowed his head as the evening breeze touched his face. It was an old pain and there were whole days when he did not think of her. Then the guilt would surface and the dreams would be terrible, as if in punishment for the lapse.

‘Julius? The guard is at the door for you,’ Brutus said, touching him on the shoulder. Julius nodded and turned back to the men in the room, his eyes seeking out the stranger amongst them.

The legionary looked nervous as he glanced around at the map-laden tables and the jugs of wine, clearly awed by the people within.

‘Well?’ Julius said.

The soldier swallowed as he met the dark eyes of his general. There was no kindness in that hard, fleshless face and the young legionary stammered slightly.

‘A young Spanish at the gate, General. He says he’s the one we’re looking for.’

The conversations in the room died away and the guard wished he were anywhere else but under the scrutiny of those men.

‘Have you checked him for weapons?’ Julius said.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then bring him to me. I want to speak to the man who has caused me so much trouble.’

Julius stood waiting at the top of the stairs as the Spaniard was brought up. His clothes were too small for his gangling limbs and the face was caught in the change between man and boy, though there was no softness in the bony jaw. As their eyes met, the Spaniard hesitated, stumbling.

‘What’s your name, boy?’ Julius said as they came level.

‘Adàn,’ the Spaniard forced out.

‘*You* killed my officer?’ Julius said, with a sneer.

The young man froze, then nodded, his expression wavering between fear and determination. He could see the faces turned towards him in the room and his courage seemed to desert him then at the thought of stepping into their midst. He might have held back if the guard hadn’t shoved him across the threshold.

‘Wait below,’ Julius told the legionary, suddenly irritated.

Adàn refused to bow his head in the face of the hostile glares of the Romans, though he could not remember being more frightened in his life. As Julius closed the door behind him, he started silently, cursing his nervousness. Adàn watched as the general sat down facing him and a dull terror overwhelmed him. Should he keep his hands by his sides? All of a sudden, they seemed awkward and he considered folding them or clasping his fingers behind his back. The silence was painful as he waited and still they had their eyes on him. Adàn swallowed with difficulty, determined not to show his fear.

‘You knew enough to tell me your name. Can you understand me?’ Julius asked.

Adàn worked spit into his dry mouth. ‘I can,’ he said. At least his voice hadn’t quavered like a boy’s. He squared his shoulders slightly and glanced at the others, almost recoiling from the naked animosity from one of them, a bear of a man with one arm who seemed to be practically growling with anger.

‘You told the guards you were the one we were looking for, the one who killed the soldier,’ Julius said.

Adàn's gaze snapped back to him.

'I did it. I killed him,' he replied, the words coming in a rush.

'You tortured him,' Julius added.

Adàn swallowed again. He had imagined this scene as he walked over the dark fields to the fort, but he couldn't summon the defiance he had pictured. He felt as if he was confessing to his father, and it was all he could do not to shuffle his feet in shame, despite his intentions.

'He was trying to rape my mother. I took him into the woods. She tried to stop me, but I would not listen to her,' Adàn said stiffly, trying to remember the words he had practised.

Someone in the room muttered an oath, but Adàn could not tear his eyes away from the general. He felt an obscure relief that he had told them. Now they would kill him and his parents would be released.

Thinking of his mother was a mistake. Tears sprang from nowhere to rim his eyes and he blinked them back furiously. She would want him to be strong in front of these men.

Julius watched him. The young Spaniard was visibly trembling, and with reason. He had only to give the order and Adàn would be taken out into the yard and executed in front of the assembled ranks. It would be the end of it, but a memory stayed his hand.

'Why have you given yourself up, Adàn?'

'My family have been taken in for questioning, General. They are innocent. I am the one you want.'

'You think your death will save them?'

Adàn hesitated. How could he explain that only that thin hope had made him come?

'They have done nothing wrong.'

Julius raised a hand to scratch his eyebrow, then rested his elbow on the arm of the chair as he thought.

'When I was younger than you, Adàn, I stood in front of a

Roman named Cornelius Sulla. He had murdered my uncle and broken everything I valued in the world. He told me I would go free if I put aside my wife and shamed her with her father. He *cherished* such little acts of spite.'

For a moment, Julius looked into the unimaginable distance of the past and Adàn felt sweat break out on his forehead. Why was the man talking to him? He had already confessed; there was nothing else. Despite his fear, he felt interest kindle. The Romans seemed to bear only one face in Spain. To hear they had rivalry and enemies within their own ranks was a revelation.

'I hated that man, Adàn,' Julius continued. 'If I had been given a weapon, I would have used it on him even though it meant my own life. I wonder if you understand that sort of hatred.'

'You did not give up your wife?' Adàn asked.

Julius blinked at the sudden question, then smiled bitterly.

'No. I refused and he let me live. The floor at his feet was spattered with the blood of people he had killed and tortured, yet he let me live. I have often wondered why.'

'He did not think you were a threat,' Adàn said, surprised by his own courage to speak so to the general. Julius shook his head in memory.

'I doubt it. I told him I would devote my life to killing him if he set me free.' For a moment, he almost said aloud how his friend had poisoned the Dictator, but that part of the story could never be told, not even to the men in that room.

Julius shrugged. 'He died by someone else's hand, in the end. It is one of the regrets of my life that I could not do it myself and watch the life fade from his eyes.'

Adàn had to look away from the fire he saw in the Roman. He believed him and the thought of this man ordering his own death with such malice made him shudder.

Julius did not speak again for a long time and Adàn felt

weak with the tension, his head jerking upwards as the general broke the silence at last.

‘There are murderers in the cells here and in Valentia. One of them will be hanged for your crimes as well as his own. You, I am going to pardon. I will sign my name to it and you will go back to your home with your family and never come to my attention again.’

Renius snorted in amazement. ‘I would like a private word, General,’ he grated, looking venomously at Adàn. The young Spaniard stood with his mouth open.

‘You may not have one, Renius. I have spoken and it will stand,’ Julius replied without looking at him. He watched the boy for a moment and felt a weight lift off him. He had made the right decision, he was sure. He had seen himself in the Spaniard’s eyes and it was like lifting a veil into his memory. How frightening Sulla had seemed then. To Adàn, Julius would have been another of that cruel type, wrapped in metal armour and harder thoughts. How close he had come to sending Adàn to be impaled, or burnt, or nailed to the gates of the fort, as Sulla had with so many of his enemies. It was an irony that Sulla’s old whim had saved Adàn, but Julius had caught himself before he gave the order for death and wondered at what he was becoming. He would not be those men he had hated. Age would not force him into their mould, if he had the strength. He rose from his seat and faced Adàn.

‘I do not expect you to waste this chance, Adàn. You will not have another from me.’

Adàn almost burst into tears, emotions roiling and overwhelming him. He had prepared himself for death and having it snatched away and freedom promised was too much for him. On an impulse, he took a step forward and went down on one knee before anyone could react.

Julius stood slowly, looking down at the young man before him.

‘We are not the enemy, Adàn. Remember that. I will have a scribe prepare the pardon. Wait below for me,’ he said.

Adàn rose and looked into the Roman’s dark eyes for a last moment before leaving the room. As the door closed behind him, he sagged against the wall, wiping sweat from his face. He felt dizzy with relief and every breath he pulled in was clear and cold. He could not understand why he had been spared.

The guard in the room below craned his head to stare up at Adàn’s slumped figure in the shadows.

‘Shall I heat the knives for you then?’ the Roman sneered up at him.

‘Not today,’ Adàn replied, enjoying the look of confusion that passed over the man’s face.

Brutus pressed a cup of wine into Julius’ hand, pouring expertly from an amphora.

‘Are you going to tell us why you let him go?’ he said.

Julius lifted the cup to cut off the flow and drank from it before holding it out again. ‘Because he was brave,’ he said.

Renius rubbed the bristles of his chin with his hand. ‘He will be famous in the towns, you realise. He will be the man who faced us and lived. They’ll probably make him mayor when old Del Subió dies. The young ones will flock around him and before you know it . . .’

‘Enough,’ Julius interrupted, his face flushing from the heady wine. ‘The sword is not the answer to everything, no matter how you may wish it so. We have to live with them without sending our men out in pairs and watching every alley and track for ambush.’ His hands cut shapes in the air as he strained to find words for the thought.

‘They must be as Roman as we are, willing to die for our causes and against our enemies. Pompey showed the way with

the legions he raised here. I spoke the truth when I said we were not the enemy. Can you understand that?’

‘I understand,’ *Ciro* spoke suddenly, his deep voice rumbling out over *Renius*’ reply.

Julius’ face lit with the idea. ‘There it is. *Ciro* was not born in Rome, but he came to us freely and is *of* Rome.’ He struggled for words, his mind running faster than his tongue. ‘Rome is . . . an idea, more than blood. We must make it so that for *Adán* to cast us off would be like tearing his own heart out. Tonight, he will wonder why he wasn’t killed. He will know there can be justice, even after the death of a Roman soldier. He will tell the story and those who doubt will pause. That is enough of a reason.’

‘Unless he killed the man for sport,’ *Renius* said, ‘and he tells his friends we are weak and stupid.’ He didn’t trust himself to speak further, but crossed to *Brutus* and took the amphora from him, holding it in the crook of his elbow to fill his cup. In his anger, some of it splashed onto the floor.

Julius narrowed his eyes slightly at the old gladiator. He took a slow breath to control the temper that swelled in him.

‘I will not be *Sulla*, or *Cato*. Do you understand *that* at least, *Renius*? I will not rule with fear and hatred and taste every meal for poison. Do you understand *that*?’ His voice had risen as he spoke and *Renius* turned to face him, realising he had gone too far.

Julius raised a clenched fist, anger radiating off him.

‘If I say the word, *Ciro* will cut out your heart for me, *Renius*. He was born on a coast of a different land, but he is Roman. He is a soldier of the Tenth and he is mine. I do not hold him with fear, but with love. Do you understand *that*?’

Renius froze. ‘I know that, of course, you . . .’

Julius interrupted him with a wave of his hand, feeling a headache spike between his eyes. The fear of a fit in front of them made his anger vanish and he was left feeling empty and tired.

‘Leave me, all of you. Fetch Cabera. Forgive my anger, Renius. I need to argue with you just to know my own mind.’

Renius nodded, accepting the apology. He went out with the others, leaving Julius alone in the room. The gathering gloom of the evening had turned almost to night and Julius lit the lamps before standing by the open window, pressing his forehead against the cool stone. The headache throbbed and he groaned softly, rubbing his temples in circular motions as Cabera had taught him.

There was so much work to do and all the time an inner voice whispered at him, mockingly. Was he hiding in these hills? Where once he had dreamed of standing in the senate house, now he drew back from it. Cornelia was dead, Tubruk with her. His daughter was a stranger, living in a house he had visited for only one night in six years. There had been times when he hungered to match his strength and wit against men like Sulla and Pompey, but now the thought of throwing himself back into games of power made him nauseous with hatred. Better, surely better, to make a home in Spain, to find a woman there and never see his home again.

‘I cannot go back,’ he said aloud, his voice cracking.

Renius found Cabera in the stables, lancing a swelling in the soft flesh of a cavalry hoof. The horses always seemed to understand he was trying to help them and even the most spirited stood still after only a few murmured words and pats.

They were alone and Renius waited until Cabera’s needle had released the pus in the hoof, his fingers massaging the soft flesh to help the drain. The horse shuddered as if flies were landing on its skin, but Cabera had never been kicked and the leg was relaxed in his steady hands.

‘He wants you,’ Renius said.

Cabera looked up at his tone. ‘Hand me that pot, will you?’

Renius passed over the cup of sticky tar that would seal the wound. He watched Cabera work in silence and when the wound was coated, Cabera turned to him with his usual humour dampened.

‘You’re worried about Julius,’ the old healer said.

Renius shrugged. ‘He’s killing himself here. Of course I’m worried. He doesn’t sleep, just spends his nights working on his mines and maps. I . . . can’t seem to talk to him without it becoming an argument.’

Cabera reached out and gripped the iron muscles of Renius’ arm.

‘He knows you’re here, if he needs you,’ he said. ‘I’ll give him a sleeping draught for tonight. Perhaps you should take one as well. You look exhausted.’

Renius shook his head. ‘Just do what you can for him. He deserves better than this.’

Cabera watched the one-armed gladiator stride away into the darkness.

‘You are a good man, Renius,’ he said, too quietly to be heard.