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Emperor: The Gates of Rome

Written by Conn Iggulden

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EMPEROR
THE GATES OF ROME

CONN IGGULDEN

HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers*
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CHAPTER ONE

The track in the woods was a wide causeway to the two boys strolling down it. Both were so dirty with thick, black mud as to be almost unrecognisable as human. The taller of the two had blue eyes that seemed unnaturally bright against the cracking, itching mud that plastered him.

'We're going to be killed for this, Marcus,' he said, grinning. In his hand, a sling spun lazily, held taut with the weight of a smooth river pebble.

'Your fault, Gaius, for pushing me in. I told you the river bed wasn't dry all the way.'

As he spoke, the shorter boy laughed and shoved his

friend into the bushes that lined the path. He whooped and ran as Gaius scrambled out and set off in pursuit, sling whirring in a disc.

'Battle!' he shouted in his high, unbroken voice.

The beating they would get at home for ruining their tunics was far away and both boys knew every trick to get out of trouble – all that mattered was charging through the woodland paths at high speed, scaring birds. Both boys were barefoot, already with calluses developing, despite not having seen more than eight summers.

'This time, I'll catch him,' Gaius panted to himself as he ran. It was a mystery to him how Marcus, who had the same number of legs and arms, could yet somehow make them move faster than he could. In fact, as he was shorter, his stride should have been a little less, surely?

The leaves whipped by him, stinging his bare arms. He could hear Marcus taunting him up ahead, close. Gaius showed his teeth as his lungs began to hurt.

Without warning, he broke into a clearing at full pelt and skidded to a sudden, shocked stop. Marcus was lying on the ground, trying to sit up and holding his head in his right hand. Three men – no, older boys – were standing there, carrying walking staffs.

Gaius groaned as he took in his surroundings. The

chase had carried the two boys off his father's small estate and into their neighbours' part of the woods. He should have recognised the track that marked the boundary, but he'd been too caught up in catching Marcus for once.

'What do we have here? A couple of little mudfish, crawled up out of the river!'

It was Suetonius who spoke, the eldest son of the neighbouring estate. He was fourteen and killing time before he went into the army. He had the sort of trained muscles the two younger boys hadn't begun to develop. He had a mop of blond hair over a face speckled with white-headed eruptions that covered his cheeks and forehead, with a sprinkling of angry-looking red ones disappearing under his *praetexta* tunic. He also had a long straight stick, friends to impress and an afternoon to while away.

Gaius was frightened, knowing he was out of his depth. He and Marcus were trespassing – the best they could expect was a few blows, the worst was a beating with broken bones. He glanced at Marcus and saw him try to stagger to his feet. He'd obviously been belted with something as he ran into the older boys.

'Let us go, Tonius, we're expected back.'

'*Speaking* mudfish! We'll make our fortune, boys!

Grab hold of them, I have a roll of twine for tying up pigs that will do just as well for mudfish.'

Gaius didn't consider running, with Marcus unable to get away. This wasn't a game – the cruelty of the boys could be managed if they were treated carefully, talked to like scorpions, ready to strike without warning.

The two other boys approached with their staffs held ready. They were both strangers to Gaius. One dragged Marcus to his feet and the other, a hefty, stupid-looking boy, rammed his stick into Gaius' stomach. He doubled up in agony, unable to speak. He could hear the boy laughing as he cramped and groaned, trying to curl into the pain.

'There's a branch that will do. Tie their legs together and string them up to swing. We can see who's the best shot with javelins and stones.'

'Your father knows my father,' Gaius spat out, as the pain in his stomach lessened.

'True – doesn't like him though. My father is a proper patrician, not like yours. Your whole family could be his servants if he wanted. I'd make that mad mother of yours scrub the tiles.'

At least he was talking. The thug with the horsehair twine was intent on tying knots at Gaius' feet, ready to hoist him into the air. What could he say to bargain? His father had no real power in the city. His

mother's family had produced a couple of consuls – that was it. Uncle Marius was a powerful man, so his mother said.

'We are *nobilitas* – my Uncle Marius is not a man to cross . . .'

There was a sudden high-pitched yelp as the string over the branch went tight and Marcus was swung into the air upside down.

'Tie the end to that stump. This fish next,' Tonius said, laughing gleefully.

Gaius noted that the two friends followed his orders without question. It would be pointless trying to appeal to one of them.

'Let us down, you spot-covered pus-bag!' Marcus shouted as his face darkened with the rush of blood.

Gaius groaned. Now they would be killed, he was sure.

'You idiot, Marcus. Don't mention his spots; you can see he must be sensitive about them.'

Suetonius raised an eyebrow and his mouth opened in astonishment. The heavy-set boy paused as he threw the twine over the same branch as Marcus.

'Oh, you have made a mistake, little fish. Finish stringing that one up, Decius, I'm going to make him bleed a little.'

Suddenly, the world tilted sickeningly and Gaius could hear the twine creak and a low whistle in

his ears as his head filled with blood. He rotated slowly and came round to see Marcus in a similar predicament. His nose was a little bloody from being knocked down the first time.

'I think you've stopped my nosebleed, Tonius. Thanks.' Marcus' voice trembled slightly and Gaius smiled at his bravery.

When he'd first come to live with them, the little boy had been naturally nervous and a little small for his age. Gaius had shown him around the estate and they'd ended up in the hay barn, right at the top of the stacked sheaves. They had looked down at the loose pile far below and Gaius had seen Marcus' hands tremble.

'I'll go first and show you how it's done,' Gaius had said cheerfully, launching himself feet first and whooping.

Below, he'd looked up at the edge for a few seconds, waiting to see Marcus appear. Just as he'd thought it would never happen, a small figure shot into the air, leaping high. Gaius had scrambled out of the way as Marcus crashed into the hay, winded and gasping.

'I thought you were too scared to do it,' Gaius said to the prone figure, blinking in the dust.

'I was,' Marcus had replied quietly, 'but I won't *be* afraid. I just won't.'

The hard voice of Suetonius broke into Gaius'

spinning thoughts: 'Gentlemen, meat must be tenderised with mallets. Take your stations and begin the technique, like so.'

He swung his stick at Gaius' head, catching him over the ear. The world went white, then black and when he next opened his eyes everything was spinning as the string twisted. For a while, he could feel the blows as Suetonius called out, 'One-two-three, one-two-three . . .'

He thought he could hear Marcus crying and then he passed out to the accompaniment of jeers and laughter.

He woke and went back under a couple of times in the daylight, but it was dusk when he was finally able to stay conscious. His right eye was a heavy mass of blood and his face felt swollen and caked in stickiness. They were still upside down and swinging gently as the evening breeze came in from the hills.

'Wake up, Marcus – Marcus!'

His friend didn't stir. He looked terrible, like some sort of demon. The crust of crumbling river mud had been broken away and there was now only a grey dust, streaked with red and purple. His jaw was swollen, and a lump stood out on his temple. His left hand was fat and had a blueish tinge in the failing light. Gaius tried

to move his own hands, held by the twine. Though painfully stiff, they both worked and he set about wriggling them free. His young frame was supple and the burst of fresh pain was ignored in the wave of worry he felt for his friend. He had to be all right, he had to be. First though, Gaius had to get down.

One hand came free and he reached down to the ground, scrabbling in the dust and dead leaves with his fingertips. Nothing. The other hand came free and he widened his area of search, making his body swing in a slow circle. Yes, a small stone with a sharp edge. Now for the difficult part.

'Marcus! Can you hear me? I'm going to get us down, don't you worry. Then I'm going to kill Suetonius and his fat friends.'

Marcus swung gently in silence, his mouth open and slack. Gaius took a deep breath and readied himself for the pain. Under normal circumstances, reaching up to cut through a piece of heavy twine with only a sharp stone would have been difficult, but with his abdomen a mass of bruises, it felt like an impossible task.

Go.

He heaved himself up, crying out with the pain from his stomach. He jackknifed up to the branch and gripped it with both hands, lungs heaving with the effort. He felt weak and his vision blurred. He thought he would vomit and could do no more than

just hold on for a few moments. Then, inch by inch, he released the hand with the stone and leaned back, giving himself enough room to reach the twine and saw at it, trying not to catch his skin where it had bitten into the flesh.

The stone was depressingly blunt and he couldn't hold on for long. Gaius tried to let go before his hands slipped so he could control the fall back, but it was too hard.

'Still got the stone,' he muttered to himself. 'Try again, before Suetonius comes back.'

Another thought struck him. His father could have returned from Rome. He was due back any day now. It was growing dark and he would be worried. Already, he could be out looking for the two boys, coming nearer to this spot, calling their names. He must not find them like this. It would be too humiliating.

'Marcus? We'll tell everyone we fell. I don't want my father to know about this.'

Marcus creaked round in a circle, oblivious.

Five times more, Gaius spasmed up and sawed at the twine before it parted. He hit the ground almost flat and sobbed as his torn and tortured muscles twitched and jumped.

He tried to ease Marcus to the ground, but the weight was too much for him and the thump made him wince.

As Marcus landed, he opened his eyes at the fresh pain.

'My hand,' he whispered, his voice cracking.

'Broken, I'd say. Don't move it. We have to get out of here in case Suetonius comes back or my father tries to find us. It's nearly dark. Can you stand?'

'I can, I think, though my legs feel weak. That Tonius is a bastard,' Marcus muttered. He did not try to open his swollen jaw, but spoke through fat and broken lips.

Gaius nodded grimly. 'True – we have a score to settle there, I think.'

Marcus smiled and winced at the sting of opening cuts. 'Not until we've healed a bit though, eh? I'm not up to taking him on at the moment.'

Propping each other up, the two boys staggered home in the darkness, walking a mile over the corn-fields, past the slave quarters for the field workers and up to the main buildings. As expected, the oil lamps were still lit, lining the walls of the main house.

'Tubruk will be waiting for us; he never sleeps,' Gaius muttered as they passed under the pillars of the outer gate.

A voice from the shadows made them both jump.

'A good thing too. I would have hated to miss this spectacle. You are lucky your father is not here, he'd

have taken the skin off your backs for returning to the villa looking like this. What was it this time?'

Tubruk stepped into the yellow light of the lamps and leaned forward. He was a powerfully built ex-gladiator, who'd bought the position of overseer to the small estate outside Rome and never looked back. Gaius' father said he was one in a thousand for organising talent. The slaves worked well under him, some from fear and some from liking. He sniffed at the two young boys.

'Fall in the river, did we? Smells like it.'

They nodded happily at this explanation.

'Mind you, you didn't pick up those stick marks from a river bottom, did you? Suetonius, was it? I should have kicked his backside for him years ago, when he was young enough for it to make a difference. Well?'

'No, Tubruk, we had an argument and fought each other. No one else was involved and even if there had been, we would want to handle it ourselves, you see?'

Tubruk grinned at this from such a small boy. He was forty-five years of age, with hair that had gone grey in his thirties. He had been a legionary in Africa in the Third Cyrenaica legion, and had fought nearly a hundred battles as a gladiator, collecting a mass of scars on his body. He put out his great spade

of a hand and rubbed his square fingers through Gaius' hair.

'I do see, little wolf. You are your father's son. You cannot handle everything yet though, you are just a little lad and Suetonius – or whoever – is shaping into a fine young warrior so I hear. Mind yourselves, his father is too powerful to be an enemy in the Senate.'

Gaius drew himself up to his full height and spoke as formally as he knew how, trying to assert his position.

'It is luck then, that this Suetonius is in *no* way attached to ourselves,' he replied.

Tubruk nodded as if he had accepted the point, trying not to grin.

Gaius continued more confidently: 'Send Lucius to me to look at our wounds. My nose is broken and almost certainly Marcus' hand is the same.'

Tubruk watched them totter into the main house and resumed his post in the darkness, guarding the gate on first watch, as he did each night. It would be full summer soon and the days would be almost too hot to bear. It was good to be alive with the sky so clear and honest work ahead.

The following morning was an agony of protest from muscles, cuts and joints; the two days after that were

worse. Marcus had succumbed to a fever that the physician said entered his head through the broken bone of his hand, which swelled to astonishing proportions as it was strapped and splinted. For days he was hot and had to be kept in darkness, while Gaius fretted on the steps outside.

Almost exactly one week after the attack in the woods, Marcus was lying asleep, still weak, but recovering. Gaius could still feel pain as he stretched his muscles and his face was a pretty collection of yellow and purple patches, shiny and tight in places as they healed. It was time, though: time to find Suetonius.

As he walked through the woods of the family estate, his mind was full of thoughts of fear and pain. What if Suetonius didn't show up? There was no reason to suppose that he made regular trips into the woods. What if the older boy was with his friends again? They would kill him, no doubt about it. Gaius had brought a bow with him this time, and practised drawing it as he walked. It was a man's bow and too large for him, but he found he could plant the end in the ground and pull an arrow back enough to frighten Suetonius, if the boy refused to back down.

'Suetonius, you are a pus-filled bag of dung. If I catch you on my father's land, I will put an arrow through your head.'

He spoke aloud as he went along. It was a beautiful

day to walk in the woods and he might have enjoyed it if it wasn't for his serious purpose in being there. This time, too, he had his brown hair oiled tight against his head and clean, simple clothes that allowed him easy movements and an unrestricted draw.

He was still on his side of the estate border, so Gaius was surprised when he heard footsteps up ahead and saw Suetonius and a giggling girl appear suddenly on the wide track. The older boy didn't notice him for a moment, so intent was he on grappling with the girl.

'You're trespassing,' Gaius snapped, pleased to hear his voice come out steady, even if it was high. 'You're on my father's estate.'

Suetonius jumped and swore in shock. As he saw Gaius plant one end of the bow in the path and understood the threat, he began to laugh.

'A little wolf now! A creature of many forms, it seems. Didn't you get enough of a beating last time, little wolf?'

The girl seemed very pretty to Gaius, but he wished she would go away and lose herself. He had not imagined a female present for this encounter and felt a new level of danger from Suetonius.

Suetonius put a melodramatic arm around the girl.

'Careful, my dear. He is a dangerous fighter. He

is especially dangerous when upside down, then he is unstoppable!' He laughed at his own joke and the girl joined in.

'Is he that one you mentioned, Tonius? Look at his angry little face!'

'If I see you here again, I'll put an arrow through you,' Gaius said quickly, the words tumbling over themselves. He pulled the shaft back a few inches. 'Leave now or I will strike you down.'

Suetonius had stopped smiling as he weighed up his chances.

'All right then, *parvus lupus,* I'll give you what you seem to want.'

Without warning, he rushed at him and Gaius released the arrow too quickly. It struck the tunic of the older boy, but fell away without piercing. Suetonius yelled in triumph and stepped forward with his hands outstretched and his eyes cruel. Gaius whipped the bow up in panic, hitting the older boy on the nose. Blood spurted and Tonius roared in rage and pain, his eyes filling with tears. As Gaius raised the bow again, Tonius seized it with one hand and Gaius' throat with the other, carrying him back six or seven paces with the sheer fury of his charge.

'Any other threats?' he growled as his grip tightened. Blood poured from his nose and stained his praetexta tunic. He wrenched the bow away from Gaius' grasp

and set about him with it, raining blows, but all the time keeping hold of his throat.

'He's going to kill me and pretend it was an accident,' Gaius thought desperately. 'I can see it in his eyes. I can't breathe.'

He pummelled at the larger boy with his own fists, but his reach was not enough to do any real damage. His vision lost colour, becoming like a dream; his ears ceased to hear sound. He lost consciousness as Tonius threw him down onto the wet leaves.

Tubruk found Gaius on the path about an hour later and woke him by pouring water onto his bruised and battered head. Once again, his face was a crusted mess. His barely scabbed eye had filled with blood, so that his vision was dark on that side. His nose had been rebroken and everything else was a bruise.

'Tubruk?' he murmured, dazed. 'I fell out of a tree.'

The big man's laugh echoed in the closeness of the dense woods.

'You know, lad, no one doubts your courage. It's your ability to fight I'm not too sure about. It's time you were properly trained before you get yourself killed. When your father is back from the city, I'll raise it with him.'

'You won't tell him about . . . me falling from the tree? I hit a lot of branches on the way down.' Gaius could taste blood in his mouth, leaking back from the broken nose.

'Did you manage to hit the tree at all? Even once?' Tubruk asked, looking at the scuffed leaves and reading the answers for himself.

'The tree has a nose like mine, I'd say.' Gaius tried to smile, but vomited into the bushes instead.

'Hmmm. Is this the end of it, do you think? I can't let you carry on and see you crippled or dead. When your father is away in the city, he expects you to begin to learn your responsibilities as his heir and a patrician, not an urchin involved in pointless brawls.' Tubruk paused to pick up a battered bow from the undergrowth. The string had snapped and he tutted.

'I should tan your backside for stealing this bow as well.'

Gaius nodded miserably.

'No more fights, understand?' Tubruk pulled him to his feet and wiped away some of the mud from the track.

'No more fights. Thank you for coming to get me,' Gaius replied.

The boy tottered and almost fell as he spoke and the old gladiator sighed. With a quick heave, he lifted the boy up to his shoulders and carried him down to

the main house, shouting, 'Duck!' when they came to low branches.

Except for the splinted hand, Marcus was back to his usual self by the following week. He was shorter than Gaius by about two inches, brown-haired and strong-limbed. His arms were a little out of proportion, which he claimed would make him a great swordsman when he was older because of the extra reach. He could juggle four apples and would have tried with knives if the kitchen slaves hadn't told Aurelia, Gaius' mother. She had screamed at him until he promised never to try it. The memory still made him pause whenever he picked up a blade to eat.

When Tubruk had brought the barely conscious Gaius back to the villa, Marcus was out of bed, having crept down to the vast kitchen complex. He'd been in the middle of dipping his fingers into the fat-smeared iron pans when he heard the voices and trotted past the rows of heavy brick ovens to Lucius' sickroom.

As always when they hurt themselves, Lucius, a physician slave, tended to the wounds. He looked after the estate slaves as well as the family, binding swellings, applying maggot poultices to infections, pulling teeth with his pliers and sewing up cuts. He was a quiet, patient man who always breathed through his nose

as he concentrated. The soft whistle of air from the elderly physician's lungs had come to mean peace and safety to the boys. Gaius knew that Lucius would be freed when his father died, as a reward for his silent care of Aurelia.

Marcus sat and munched on bread and black fat as Lucius set the broken nose yet again.

'Suetonius beat you again then?' he asked.

Gaius nodded, unable to speak or to see through watering eyes.

'You should have waited for me, we could have taken him together.'

Gaius couldn't even nod. Lucius finished probing the nasal cartilage and made a sharp pull, to set the loose piece in line. Fresh blood poured over the day's clotted mixture.

'By the bloody temples, Lucius, careful! You almost had my nose right off then!'

Lucius smiled and began to cut fresh linen into strips to bind around the head.

In the respite, Gaius turned to his friend. 'You have a broken, splinted hand and bruised or cracked ribs. You cannot fight.'

Marcus looked at him thoughtfully. 'Perhaps. Will you try again? He'll kill you if you do, you know.'

Gaius gazed at him calmly over the bandages as Lucius packed up his materials and rose to leave.

'Thanks, Lucius. He won't kill me because I'll beat him. I simply need to adjust my strategy, that's all.'

'He's going to kill you,' repeated Marcus, biting into a dried apple, stolen from the winter stores.

A week later to the day, Marcus rose at dawn and began his exercises, which he believed would stimulate the reflexes needed to be a great swordsman. His room was a simple cell of white stone, containing only his bed and a trunk with his personal possessions. Gaius had the adjoining room and, on his way to the toilet, Marcus kicked the door to wake him up. He entered the small room and chose one of the four stone-rimmed holes that led to a sewer of constantly running water, a miracle of engineering that meant there was little or no smell, with the night soil washing out into the river that ran through the valley. He removed the capstone and pulled up his night shift.

Gaius had not stirred when he returned, and he opened the door to chide him for his laziness. The room was empty and Marcus felt a surge of disappointment.

'You should have taken me with you, my friend. You didn't have to make it so obvious that you didn't need me.'

He dressed quickly and set out after Gaius as the

sun cleared the valley rim, lighting the estates even as the field slaves bent to work in the first session.

What mist there was burned off rapidly, even in the cooler woods. Marcus found Gaius on the border of the two estates. He was unarmed.

As Marcus came up behind him, Gaius turned, a look of horror on his face. When he saw it was his friend he relaxed and smiled.

'Glad you came, Marcus. I didn't know what time he'd arrive, so I've been here a while. I thought you were him for a moment.'

'I'd have waited with you, you know. I'm your friend, remember. Also, I owe him a beating as well.'

'Your hand is broken, Marcus. Anyway, I owe him two beatings to your one.'

'True, but I could have jumped on him from a tree, or tripped him as he ran in.'

'Tricks don't win battles. I will beat him with my strength.'

For a moment, Marcus was silenced. There was something cold and unforgiving in the usually sunny boy he faced.

The sun rose slowly, shadows changed. Marcus sat down, at first in a crouch and then with his legs sprawled out in front of him. He would not speak first. Gaius had made it a contest of seriousness. He could not stand for hours, as Gaius seemed willing to do. The

shadows moved. Marcus marked their positions with sticks and estimated that they had waited three hours when Suetonius appeared silently, walking along the path. He smiled a slow smile when he saw them and paused.

'I am beginning to like you, little wolf. I think I will kill you today, or perhaps break your leg. What do you think would be fair?'

Gaius smiled and stood as tall and as straight as he could. 'I would kill me. If you don't, I will keep fighting you until I am big and strong enough to kill you. And then I will have your woman, after I have given her to my friend.'

Marcus looked in horror as he heard what Gaius was saying. Maybe they should just run. Suetonius squinted at the boys and pulled a short, vicious little blade from his belt.

'Little wolf, mudfish – you are too stupid to get angry at, but you yap like puppies. I will make you quiet again.'

He ran at them. Just before he reached the pair, the ground gave way with a crack and he disappeared from sight in a rush of air and an explosion of dust and leaves.

'Built you a wolf trap, Suetonius,' Gaius shouted cheerfully.

The fourteen-year-old jumped for the sides and

Gaius and Marcus spent a hilarious few minutes stamping on his fingers as he tried to gain a purchase in the dry earth. He screamed abuse at them and they slapped each other on the back and jeered at him.

'I thought of dropping a big rock in on you, like they do with wolves in the north,' Gaius said quietly when Suetonius had been reduced to sullen anger. 'But you didn't kill me, so I won't kill you. I might not even tell anyone how we dropped Suetonius into a wolf trap. Good luck in getting out.'

Suddenly, he let rip with a war whoop, quickly followed by Marcus, their cries and ecstatic yells disappearing into the woods as they pelted away, on top of the world.

As they pounded along the paths, Marcus called over his shoulder, 'I thought you said you'd beat him with your strength!'

'I did. I was up all night digging that hole.'

The sun shone through the trees and they felt as if they could run all day.

Left alone, Suetonius scrabbled up the sides, caught an edge and heaved himself over and out. For a while, he sat there and contemplated his muddy praetexta and breeches. He frowned for most of the way home, but, as he cleared the trees and came out into the sunshine, he began to laugh.