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Written by Conn Iggulden

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EMPEROR DEATH^{THE} OF KINGS

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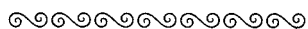
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PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE



The fort of Mytilene loomed above them on the hill. Points of light moved on the walls as sentries walked their paths in the darkness. The oak and iron gate was shut and the single road that led up the sheer slopes was heavily guarded.

Gaditicus had left only twenty of his men on the galley. As soon as the rest of the century had disembarked, he had ordered the corvus bridge pulled in and *Accipiter* slid back from the dark island, the oars barely splashing in the still sea waters.

The galley would be safe from attack while they were gone. With all lights forbidden, she was a blot of darkness that enemy ships would miss unless they came right into the small island harbour.

Julius stood with his unit, waiting for orders. Grimly, he controlled his excitement at seeing action at last after six months of coastal patrol. Even with the advantage of surprise, the fort looked solid and dangerous and he knew scaling the walls was likely to be bloody. Once more, he examined the equipment, testing each rung

of the ladders he had been issued, moving amongst the men to make sure they had cloths tied around their sandals for silence and better grip on the climb. There was nothing out of place, but his men submitted to the checks without complaint, as they had twice before since landing. He knew they would not disgrace him. Four were long-term soldiers, including Pelitas who had ten years of galley experience behind him. Julius had made him the second in the unit as soon as he realised the man had the respect of most of the crew. He had previously been overlooked for promotion, but Julius had seen the quality behind the casual approach to uniform and the quite astonishingly ugly face on the man. Pelitas had quickly become a staunch supporter of the new young *tesserarius*.

The other six had been picked up in Roman ports around Greece, as *Accipiter* made up her full complement. No doubt some of them had dark histories, but the requirements for a clean record were often ignored for galley soldiers. Men with debts or disagreements with officers knew their last chance for a salary was at sea, but Julius had no complaints. His ten men had all seen battle and to listen to them tell their stories was like a summary of the progress of Rome in the last twenty years. They were brutal and hard, and Julius enjoyed the luxury of knowing they wouldn't shirk or turn away from the dirty jobs – like clearing the Mytilene fort of rebels on a summer night.

Gaditicus walked through the units, speaking to each officer. Suetonius nodded at whatever he was told and

saluted. Julius watched his old neighbour, feeling fresh dislike but unable to pin it to any one thing in the young watch officer. For months, they had worked together with a frosty politeness that now seemed unbreakable. Suetonius still saw him as the young boy he and his friends had tied and beaten a lifetime before. He knew nothing of his experiences since then and had sneered as Julius told the men what it was like to come into Rome at the head of a Triumph with Marius. The events in the capital were only distant rumour to the men on board and Julius felt he wasn't believed by some of Tonius' friends. It was galling, but the first hint of tension or fighting between units would have meant demotion to the ranks. Julius had kept his silence, even when he heard Suetonius telling the story of how he had once left the other tesserarius swinging from a tree after cracking his head a few times. His tone had made the incident seem nothing more than a little rough fun between boys. He had felt Julius' gaze on him at the end and pretended surprise, winking at his Second as they went back to their duties.

As Gaditicus walked over to the last of his units, Julius could see Suetonius grinning behind his shoulder. He kept his own eyes on the centurion and saluted stiffly as he stood to attention. Gaditicus nodded to him, returning the salute with a quick motion of his right forearm.

'If they don't know we're here, we should be able to burn out that little nest before dawn. If they've been warned, we'll be fighting for every step. Make sure the armour and swords are muffled. I don't want them

giving the alarm while we're on the exposed flanks of that place.'

'Yes, sir,' Julius replied smartly.

'Your men will attack the south side. The slope's a little easier there. Bring the ladders in quickly and have a man at the bottom of each one to hold them steady so you don't have to waste time looking for a firm footing. I'm sending Suetonius' men to kill the gate sentries. There are four of them, so it could be noisy. If you hear shouts before you're close to the wall, sprint. We must not give them time to organise. Understand? Good. Any questions?'

'Do we know how many are in there, sir?' Julius asked.

Gaditicus looked surprised.

'We're taking that fort whether they have fifty or five hundred! They haven't paid taxes for two years and the local governor has been murdered. Do you think we should wait for reinforcements?'

Julius coloured with embarrassment. 'No, sir.'

Gaditicus chuckled bitterly. 'The navy is stretched thin enough as it is. You'll get used to never having enough men and ships if you live through tonight. Now, move to your position and take a wide berth around the fort, using cover. Understand?'

'Yes, sir,' Julius replied, saluting again. Being an officer, even the lowest rank, was difficult at the best of times. He was expected to know his business, as if the ability came with the rank. He had never assaulted a fortress before by day or night, but was supposed to make decisions on

the instant that could mean life or death for his men. He turned to them and felt a fresh surge of determination. He would not let them down.

‘You heard the centurion. Silent progress, split formation. Let’s go.’

As one, they thumped their right fists into their leather breastplates in acknowledgement. Julius winced at the small sound they made.

‘And none of that noisy business either. Until we are in the fort, any orders I give are not to be acknowledged. I don’t want you singing out “Yes, sir” when we’re trying to move silently, all right?’

One or two grinned, but the tension was palpable as they made their slow and careful way through the cover. Two other units detached with them, leaving Gaditicus to command the frontal attack once the sentries had had their throats cut.

Julius was thankful for the endless training drills as he saw the smooth way the men separated in pairs, with four of the long ladders to each unit. The soldiers could run up the wide rungs at almost full speed and it would take only seconds to reach the top of the black walls and get into the fort. Then it would be vicious. With no way of knowing how many rebels faced them, the legionaries would be looking to kill as many as possible in the first few moments.

He signalled with a flat palm for the men to crouch as one of the sentry torches stopped close to their position. Sounds would carry easily, despite the rhythmic screech of the crickets in the grass. After a short pause, the

sentry light moved on again and Julius caught the eyes of the closest officers, nodding to each other to begin the attack.

He stood and his heart beat faster. His men rose with him, one of them grunting slightly with the weight of the sturdy ladder. They began to trot up the broken rock of the southern approach. Despite the muffling cloths on their sandals and armour, the thud of feet seemed loud to Julius as he broke into a light run beside his men. Pelitas was in the lead, at the head of the first ladder, but the order changed second by second as they scrambled up the uneven surface, denied even the light of the moon to see the ground. Gaditicus had chosen the night well.

Each of the ladders was passed quickly through the hands of the man in front, who planted the trailing end close to the wall for maximum height. The first man held it steady while the second swarmed up into the darkness. In only a few seconds, the first group were over and the second ready to go, their climb made harder as the ladders slipped and scraped on the stone. Julius caught one as it moved and bunched his shoulders to hold it until the weight at the top had gone, appreciating the sharp reality of levers in the process. All along the line, the soldiers were disappearing into the fort and still the alarm had not been given.

He shifted the ladder until the padded head caught on something and gripped it tightly as he climbed, having to lean close with the sharp angle. He didn't pause at the top in case archers were sighting on him. There was no

time to judge the situation as he slid over the crown and dropped into the darkness below.

He hit and rolled to find his men around him, waiting. Before them was a short stretch of scrub grass, grown long over ancient stones. It was a killing ground for archers and they needed to be out of it quickly. Julius saw the other units had not paused and had crossed to the inner wall. He frowned. It stood as tall as the first, only twenty feet away, but this time the ladders were outside and they were trapped between the walls, as the ancient designers had planned. He swore softly to himself as the men looked to him for a quick decision.

Then a bell began to ring in the fort, the heavy tones booming out into the darkness.

‘What now, sir?’ Pelitas said, his voice sounding bored.

Julius took a deep breath, feeling his own nerves settle slightly.

‘We’re dead if we stay here and they’ll be throwing torches down soon to light us up for archers. You’re best in the rigging, Peli, so get your armour off and see if you can carry a rope up the inner wall. The stones are old, there should be a few gaps for you.’ He turned to the others as Pelitas began to undo the lacing that held his armour together.

‘We need to get that ladder back. If Peli falls, we’ll be easy targets for the archers. It’s a fifteen-foot wall, but we should be able to lift the lightest pair of you to the top, where they can reach over and drag it up.’

He ignored the growing sounds of panic and battle inside the fort. At least the rebels were concentrating on

Gaditicus' attack, but time had to be running out for the soldiers on his side.

The men understood the plan quickly and the heaviest three linked arms and braced their backs against the dark stones of the outer wall. Two more climbed up them and turned carefully so they too were able to lean against the wall behind them. The three at the bottom grunted as the weight came to bear on their armour. The metal plates bit into the men's shoulders, but without them there was a good chance of snapping a collarbone. They bore the discomfort in silence, but Julius saw they could not hold for long.

He turned to the last pair, who had taken off their armour and stripped down to underclothing and bare feet. Both grinned with excitement as Julius nodded to them and they set about climbing the tower of men with the same speed and efficiency that they brought to the rigging of *Accipiter*. He drew his sword as he waited for them, straining to see into the darkness above.

Twenty feet away on the inner wall, Pelitas pressed his face against the cold, dry stone and began a short and desperate prayer. His fingers shook as they held a tiny space between slabs and he fought not to make any noise as he heaved himself higher, his feet scrabbling for purchase. His breath hissed between his teeth, so loudly he felt sure someone would come to investigate. For a moment, he regretted bringing the heavy gladius as well as the rope wrapped around his chest, though he

couldn't think of anything worse than reaching the top without a weapon. Falling off onto his head in a great crash was a similarly unpleasant prospect, however.

Above him, he could see a dark lip of stone dimly outlined against the glow of torches as the fort sprang to defend itself from the fifty led by Gaditicus. He sneered silently to himself. Professional soldiers would already have sent scouts around the perimeter to check for a second force or an ambush. It was good to take pride in your work, he thought.

His hand searched blindly above, finally finding a good grip where a corner had crumbled away over the centuries. His arms quivered with exhaustion as Pelitas placed a palm at last on the top slab and hung for a moment, listening for anyone standing close enough to gut him as he pulled himself into the inner fort.

There was nothing, even when he held his breath to listen. He nodded to himself and clenched his jaw as if he could bite through the fear he always felt at these times, then heaved up, swinging his legs around and in. He dropped quickly into a crouch and drew the gladius inch by inch, to avoid sound.

He was in a well of shadow that left him invisible on the edge of a narrow platform with steps leading down to the other buildings on two sides. The remains of a meal on the ground showed him there had been a sentry in place, but the man had obviously gone to repel the front attack instead of staying where he had been told. In his head, Pelitas tutted at the lack of discipline.

Moving slowly, he unwound the heavy rope from his

chest and shoulders and tied one end to a rusted iron ring set in the stone. He tugged on it and smiled, letting the loops drop into the dark.

Julius saw that one of the other units was pressed close to the inner wall and was following his idea to retrieve the ladders. Next time, they would have a rope attached to the top rung to throw over the wall, the last man pulling the whole thing after them, but it was easy to be wise in hindsight. Gaditicus should have spent more time learning the layout of the fort, though that was difficult enough as nothing overlooked the steep Mytilene hill. Julius dismissed the doubt as disloyal, but a part of him knew that if *he* was ordering the attack, he would not have sent his men to take the fort until he knew everything there was to know about it.

The faces of the three men at the bottom of the tower were streaked in sweat and contorted with shuddering pain. Above, he could hear scratching sounds and then the length of ladder came sliding down to them. Quickly, Julius braced it against the wall and the tower dismantled down it, leaving the three at the bottom gasping in relief and rolling their shoulders against cramp. Julius went to each of them, clapping arms in thanks and whispering the next stage. Together, they crossed to the inner wall.

A voice yelled close in the darkness of the inner fort above them and Julius' heart hammered. He did not understand the words, but the panic was obvious. Surprise had finally gone but they had the ladder and

as he flattened himself against the wall he saw Pelitas hadn't failed or fallen.

'Move the ladder a few feet and make it steady. Three to climb the rope here. The rest with me.'

They ran to the new point and suddenly the air was cut with arrows whistling overhead, punching into the bodies of the other group bringing their ladder over. Screams sounded as the Romans were picked off. Julius counted at least five archers above, their job made easier as torches were lit and thrown down into the killing ground. There was still darkness under the inner wall and he guessed the rebels thought they were defending the first assault and didn't know the Romans were already below them.

Julius stepped onto the ladder, his gladius gripped tightly as he climbed the wide rungs. A memory flashed into his mind of the riot that had killed his father years before. So this is what it was like to be first up a wall! He pushed the thoughts aside as he came to the top and quickly threw himself down to miss an axe aimed to decapitate him. Losing balance, he scrabbled on the wall for a terrifying moment and then he was in.

There was no time to take stock of the position. He blocked another axe blow and kicked out hard as the weight of the weapon swung the wielder to one side. It crashed down on stone and his sword slid easily into the heaving chest of the enemy. Something hit him on the helmet, snapping his cheek-guard. His vision blurred and his sword came up to block automatically. He felt wet blood run down his neck and chest to his stomach but ignored it. More of his unit

reached the narrow walkway and the cutting began properly.

Three of his unit formed a tight wedge around the top of the ladder, their light armour denting under heavy blows. Julius saw a gladius jerked up into a jaw from below, impaling one of the rebels.

The men they faced wore no common uniform. Some sported ancient armour and wielded strange blades, while others carried hatchets or spears. They were Greek in appearance and shouted to each other in that liquid language. It was messy and Julius could only swear as one of his men fell with a cry, blood spattering darkly in the torchlight. Footsteps crashed and echoed all round the fort. It sounded as if there was an army in there, all running to this point. Two more of his men made the walkway and launched into the fight, pushing the enemy back.

Julius jabbed his gladius tip into a man's throat in a lunge Renius had taught him years before. He hit hard and furiously and his opponents flailed and died. Whatever they were, the men they faced were winning only with numbers. The Roman skill and training was making the core of soldiers round the ladder almost impossible to break.

Yet they were tiring. Julius saw one of his men yell in frustration and fear as his sword jammed between the plates of an ornate set of armour, probably handed down from generation to generation since the time of Alexander. The Roman wrenched at it viciously, almost knocking the armoured rebel from his feet with

the movement. His angry shout changed abruptly to a scream and Julius could see the rebel punching a short dagger into his man's groin under the armour. Finally the Roman went limp, leaving his gladius still wedged.

'To me!' Julius shouted to his men. Together they could force a path along the narrow walkway and move deeper into the fort. He saw steps nearby and motioned to them. More men fell to him and he began to enjoy the fight. The sword was a good weight. The armour gave him a sense of being invulnerable and with the hot blood of action in his system, it sat lightly on him.

A sudden blow to his head removed the damaged helmet and he could feel the cool night air on his sweating skin. It was a pleasure, and he chuckled for a moment as he stepped in and barged a man's shield, knocking him into the path of his fellows.

'*Accipiter!*' he shouted suddenly. Hawk. It would do. He heard voices echo it and roared it again, ducking under a fore-curved sword that looked more like a farm implement than a weapon of war. His return stroke cut the man's thighs open, dropping him bawling on the stones.

The other legionaries gathered around him. He saw eight of his unit had made the wall and there were six others who had survived the archers. They stood together and the rebels began to waver in their rushing as the bodies piled around them.

'Soldiers of Rome, *we* are,' grunted one of them. 'Best in the world. Come on, don't hang back.'

Julius grinned at him and took up the shout of the

galley name when it was begun again. He hoped Pelitas would hear them. Somehow, he didn't doubt the ugly bastard had survived.

Pelitas had found a cloak on a hook and used it to cover his tunic and drawn sword. He felt vulnerable without his armour, but the men who clattered past didn't even glance at him. He heard the legionaries growl and shout their challenges nearby and realised it was time to join the fight.

He lifted a torch from a wall bracket and joined the enemy rush to the clash of blades. Gods, there were a lot of them! The inner fort was a maze of broken walls and empty rooms, the sort of place that took hours to clear, with every step open to ambush and arrow fire. He rounded a corner in the darkness, ignored and anonymous for precious moments. He moved quickly, trying not to lose his sense of direction in twists and turns, and then found himself on the north wall, near a group of archers who were firing carefully, their expressions serious and calm. Presumably, the remnants of Gaditicus' force were still out there, though he could hear Roman orders snapped out in the yard by the main gate. Some had got in, but the battle was far from over.

Half the town must have holed up in the fort, he thought angrily as he approached the archers. One looked up sharply at his approach, but only nodded, firing unhurriedly into the mass of men below them.

As he aimed, Pelitas charged, knocking two of the men

headfirst to the stones below. They hit with a crash and the other three archers turned in horror to see him as he threw back the cloak and raised the short gladius.

‘Evening, lads,’ he said, his voice calm and cheerful. One step brought his sword into the chest of the closest. He kned the body off the wall and then an arrow thumped into him, tearing straight through his side. Only the flights jutted from his stomach and he groaned as his left hand plucked at them, almost without his control. Viciously, he swiped the gladius through the throat of the closest archer, who was raising his own arrow.

It was the last and furthest from him who had fired the shaft. Feverishly, he tried to notch another, but fear made him clumsy and Pelitas reached him, sword held out for the thrust. The man backed away in panic and screamed as he fell from the wall. Pelitas went down slowly onto one knee, his breathing rasping painfully. There was no one near and he laid down his sword, reaching around himself to try and snap the arrow. He would not remove it completely. All the soldiers had seen the rush of blood that could kill you when you did. The thought of catching it every time he turned made his eyes water.

His grip was slippery and he could only bend the wooden shaft, a low moan of agony escaping him. His side was soaked in blood and he felt dizzy as he tried to stand up. Growling softly, he eased the arrow back through himself, so it wasn’t sticking so far out behind.

‘Have to find the others,’ he muttered, taking a deep breath. His hands quivered with the beginnings of shock,

so he gripped the gladius as tightly as possible and wrapped his other fist in a fold of the cloak.

Gaditicus backhanded a man in the teeth as he ran at him, following through with a short thrust into the ribs. The fort was filled with rebels, more than the small island would support, he was sure. The rebellion must have picked up firebrands from the mainland, but it was too late to worry now. He remembered the young officer's question about numbers and how he'd scorned it. Perhaps he should have organised reinforcements. The outcome of the night wasn't easy to predict.

It had started well, with the sentries taken quickly, almost in the same heartbeat. He had ten men over the ladders and the gate open before anyone inside knew what was happening. Then the dark buildings had vomited soldiers at them, pulling on their armour as they ran. The narrow walkways and steps made the maze an archer's dream, with only the poor light holding their casualties down to flesh wounds, though he'd lost one man to a shaft into his mouth, straight through his skull.

He could hear his men panting as they pressed close to a wall in darkness behind him. Some torches had been lit, but apart from the occasional arrow fired blindly the enemy had retreated for the moment into the side buildings. Anyone rushing down the path between them was going to be cut to pieces before they made a few paces, but equally the enemy could not leave the shelter

to engage the legionaries. It was a temporary lull and Gaditicus was pleased to have the chance to get his breath back. He missed the fitness of the land legions. No matter how you drilled and exercised on a ship, a few minutes of fighting and running left you exhausted. Or maybe it was just age, he acknowledged wryly to himself.

'They've gone to ground,' he muttered. It would be bitter from now on, killing from building to building, losing one of theirs for every one or two of the enemy. It was too easy for them to wait inside a door or a window and stab the first thing to come through.

Gaditicus was turning to the soldier behind to give orders when the man looked down, his mouth dropping in horror. The stones were covered in shining liquid that streamed quickly through the group and sluiced down between the fort buildings. There was no time to make a plan.

'Run!' Gaditicus yelled to the group. 'Get high! Gods, run!'

Some of the younger men gaped, not understanding, but the experienced ones didn't wait to find out. Gaditicus was at the back, trying not to think about the archers waiting for just this moment. He heard the crackle and whoosh of fire as they lit the sticky fluid and arrows whined past him, taking a legionary in the lower back. The soldier staggered on for a moment before collapsing. Gaditicus stopped to help him, but as he turned his head he saw flames racing towards them. He drew his sword quickly through the soldier's throat, knowing it was better than burning. He could feel the

heat on his back and panic filled him as he rose from the body. His sandals were wet with the stuff and he knew the fire could not be quenched. He ran blindly after his men.

At full pounding sprint, the group of soldiers rounded a corner and charged on, straight at a group of three crouched archers. All three panicked and only one took the shot, sending an arrow above their heads. The archers were cut down and trampled almost without slowing.

On sheets of flame, the fort became visible. Gaditicus and the others roared in anger and relief at being alive, the sound fuelling their strength and frightening the enemy.

The path ended in a courtyard and this time the waiting archers fired smoothly, destroying the front four men and sending the second row sprawling over their dead companions. The yard was full of the rebels and with a baying cry to answer the Romans in ferocity they came on, howling.

Julius froze as he saw the flames explode along a row of squat buildings to his left. The sheltering darkness became flickering gold and shadow and three men in an alcove were suddenly visible a few paces ahead. They were cut down and behind them an open doorway was revealed, leading into the bowels of the fort. It was the decision of a second and Julius ran straight through it, ripping his sword through the guts of a man waiting inside before he could strike. His followers

never hesitated. Without knowing the fort, they could spend fruitless minutes searching for ways to reach their comrades with Gaditicus. The most important thing was to keep moving and kill anyone they came across.

After the light of the fire, it was frighteningly dark inside the fortress. Steps led down to a row of empty rooms and at the end was another set, with a single oil lamp on the wall. Julius grabbed it, swearing as the hot liquid splattered onto his skin. His men clattered behind him and at the bottom Julius threw himself down as arrows hit stone around him and shattered, sending stinging fragments into their midst.

The long, low room they entered had three men in it. Two looked terrified at the dirty, blood-covered soldiers and the third was tied to a chair, a prisoner. Julius saw by his robe that he was a Roman. His face and body were battered and swollen, but his eyes were alive with sudden hope.

Julius raced across the room, swaying to avoid another shaft fired poorly and in haste. Almost with contempt, he reached the two men and cut the archer across the throat. The other tried to stab him, but the chestplate took the blow easily and his backhand cut sent the man crashing to the floor.

Julius rested the point of his gladius on the stones and leaned on it, suddenly tired. His breathing came in great gasps and he noticed how silent the place was, how far below the main fort they were.

'That was well done,' said the man in the chair.

Julius glanced at him. Up close, he saw the man had

been brutally tortured. His face was swollen and twisted and his fingers had been broken, jutting at obscene angles. Trembling shook the man's body and Julius guessed he was trying not to lose what little control he had left.

'Cut his bonds,' he ordered and helped the prisoner to his feet as he came free, noting how unsteady he was. One of the man's hands touched the arm of the chair and he gave out a moan of agony, his eyes rolling up in his head for a second before he steadied under Julius' grip.

'Who are you?' Julius said, wondering what they were going to do with the man.

'Governor Paulus. You might say . . . this is my fort.' The man closed his eyes as he spoke, overwhelmed by exhaustion and relief. Julius saw his courage and felt a touch of respect.

'Not yet it isn't, sir,' Julius replied. 'There's a lot of fighting above and we have to get back to it. I suggest we find you somewhere safe to wait it out. You don't look quite up to joining in.'

In fact the man looked bloodless, his skin slack and grey. He was about fifty years old with heavy shoulders and a sagging stomach. He might once have been a warrior, Julius judged, but time and soft living had taken his strength, at least of the body.

The governor stood straighter, the effort of will obvious.

'I'll go with you as far as I can. My hands are smashed, so I can't fight, but I want to get out of this stinking pest-hole, at least.'

Julius nodded quickly, signalling to two of the men.

'Take his arms, gently, carry him if you have to. We must get back to help Gaditicus.'

With that, Julius was clattering up the steps, his mind already on the battle above.

'Come on, sir. Lean on my shoulder,' said one of the last pair as he took the weight. The governor cried out as his broken hands moved, then gritted his teeth against the pain.

'Get me out quickly,' he ordered curtly. 'Who was the officer who freed me?'

'That was Caesar, sir,' the soldier replied as they began the slow trip. By the end of the first flight of stairs, the pain had forced the governor into unconsciousness and they were able to go much faster.