

PART ONE

IMPERIUM

Prologue

Alexandria, Egypt, August 1, 30 BC

Across the immense harbour, the feluccas were returning with the day's catch, their small black silhouettes emerged from the shimmering haze into the amber hue of the late afternoon like a flotilla of ghost-ships, the sea around them scattered with solar jewels flaring and glinting on the rippled surface. Like dragonflies, the feluccas darted swiftly this way and that, their single sails bringing the winds easily to their command.

Gaius Octavius Julius Caesar watched the nimble flotilla of little ships whipping through the water in the busy harbour, nipping deftly between the huge grain ships anchored in the bay, waiting to be loaded and sent back to feed the incessant hunger of Rome. They passed dexterously between the creaky old dahabeah, the cargo ships of the Nile that had entered the harbour from the canal, laden with plunder.

He could smell the sea carried on the warm breeze blowing in from the bay, fresh and pleasant in his face and through his short-cropped hair. Still intoxicated on the fruits of victory, he had an air of arrogance about him as he looked over to Agrippa's fleet anchored in the harbour beneath the majestic structures along Cape Lochias. His eyes followed the sea walls and the impressive fortifications upon them. They did Egypt no good in the end; in fact, they proved to be of no tactical advantage whatsoever. Caesar took the city by land in a broad pincer from which Antonius and Cleopatra could not escape.

Overawed by his own success, was Duilius's thought as he wiped the sweat from his grimy face with the back of his hand, dust and desert sand abrading his skin like needles. His tongue squeezed between his dry cracked lips and swept from left to right, the cracked skin like jagged shards of glass. *I need a drink*, he thought, stifling under the blazing sun beating down its oppressive heat, roasting him alive inside his cuirass like a joint of meat. This is how Icarus must have felt when he flew too close to the sun – too close to exalted power. It was excruciatingly uncomfortable.

There's something inhuman about Caesar, he thought, being perfectly comfortable out here in that scorching heat. Forged in Vulcan's workshop like his uncle, he thought, then withdrew the thought at once, considering Caesar's usual sickly disposition, he hardly felt Vulcan's workshop an appropriate comparison. The constitution of a lizard perhaps, if he might make so bold as to ponder the thought of scaly flesh under all that unblemished armour. Army life never did

agree with Caesar, it was merely the means to the end, and now that end had been reached. Only Caesar was left standing, all his enemies were finally vanquished after years of bloody civil war.

He was more than a general now – he was the most powerful man on the earth. The sickly and somewhat insipid boy had blossomed to the point of deification.

‘... We’ve come a long way since Velitrae,’ said Duilius, invoking the name of their home town in the Alban Hills, where they had been boys together.

Caesar felt the tug of his ancestors and recalled the processions and festivals of Jupiter Latiaris at his hilltop sanctuary, where his mother Atia Balba Caesonia, niece of the great Julius Caesar, once told him that on the night he was born, Jupiter’s burning finger arced across the heavens over the sanctuary, auguring that a great destiny was written for him, and one day he would rule the world. Here he stood, these years later, prophesy fulfilled.

He could hear her now, calling him from the afterlife, telling him that this is just the beginning. He blinked and her voice was gone. He looked at Duilius. ‘Happy days, Duilius.’

‘The *happiest* of days, Caesar,’ Duilius replied as he looked out across the bay, supplanting the heaving sea beyond with the rolling hills of home, lush with olive groves and vineyards climbing into the haze of hot summer days. ‘I think I shall go home,’ he said wistfully, ‘and have an idle summer on my estate. Get drunk every night on passum and ravage my slaves until my *pippina* drops off...’

The four men chuckled lowly.

‘I’m afraid you’ll have to wait a little longer before you see Velitrae again, Duilius,’ Caesar said. ‘We both shall...’

Agrippa and Calvinus looked at one another.

‘Such melancholy,’ said Agrippa. ‘Riding into Rome at the head of your victory triumph with the riches of Asia and Egypt and the Greek whore in following behind you will be the happiest of days.’

‘Firstly, we must consolidate our power, Agrippa,’ Caesar said as he walked towards the edge of the terrace, watching another dark shape metamorphose from the shimmering obscuration beyond Pharos Island, approaching the peninsular from the open sea, her broad white sail bloated to the wind as she slipped gracefully towards the harbour mouth – an Italian cargo ship.

It was an immutable feeling of elation, joy, power, disbelief – *dread*. It was as if he were walking in another man’s *caligae*, experiencing another man’s life, and for a moment, he wondered if he might be dreaming, because he had dreamt of this day every night for the past fourteen years and had experienced it in a thousand scenarios. Antonius’ suicide had denied him the pleasure of seeing him paraded in chains with his queen through Rome – but it was a pleasure worth forfeiture in the cold reality of the here and now, and when he thought about it, he decided it was the best thing for expedience sake. Taking Antonius back to

Rome alive would have been a risk – but then, it had never really been an option. Nobody was in any doubt that Marcus Antonius would never have allowed himself to be taken alive.

And as if reading his mind, Agrippa said: ‘Tomorrow, the sun will rise on a new era, Caesar. You have changed the world forever.’

Caesar looked at his three companions, and at length, he said: ‘For the first time in a hundred years, Rome is at peace with herself. But now is not the time for complacency. In fact, now, more than ever, we must be vigilant in what we do and there’s still much to be done. There are still Antonians out there, and they’re single-minded now more than ever,’ he warned. ‘Now Antonius is more than a mortal man, he’s even more dangerous.’

There was a long silence.

Duilius fiddled absentmindedly with the pommel of his sword, rubbing the ivory Aquila’s head with his thumb, stretching his sore lips across his teeth, feeling the skin pulling apart like opening fissures. ‘Rome is there for the taking,’ he said looking out to sea. ‘You have the loyalty of the legions; no one will dare oppose you.’

Caesar shook his head. ‘No, Duilius. That’s not the way. I’ll return to Rome as her saviour, not her conqueror. As the man who preserved the Senate and saved the Republic from madness and endless war, not the man who subdued and destroyed her. The people must love me, not despise me.

‘Under my guidance,’ he went on, watching the Roman merchant ship coming into the harbour’s broad expanse, ‘I command legions that Alexander the Great would have envied. I do not have to use threats or force, gentlemen. They will give me everything I want without needing to resort to either.’

Calvinus gave him a cautionary look. ‘Then I urge you, Caesar, do not make the same mistakes your father made before you, by allowing your enemies to live, or you bear your throat to your assassins,’ he warned ominously.

Caesar looked reassuringly at him. ‘Rest assured, old friend, by the time *I’m* done, it will be *they* who bear *their* throats to *me*. And I will strike ruthlessly and without favour or prejudice, any who plot against the good of Rome. My mercy does not come without a price.’

Calvinus fanned himself with his hand to no effect. Any breeze that did render them relief from the heat was as brief as a dying gasp. ‘They bear watching, Caesar. And all the while the Antonian renegades are on the loose, your position is threatened. As you said yourself, Antonius’s name now holds the divinity and mysticism of a god.’

Caesar wasn’t going to let a dead man usurp his destiny, as he tirelessly tried to in life. He had to see his vision through, no matter where it might take him. ‘We must make certain our enemies are either in chains or dead.’ He looked at Calvinus and Agrippa in turn.

Conversation returned to consolidating Asia Minor and how to deal with the Senate back home.

With care, Calvinus thought. *One always handles snakes with care.*

Caesar was now *patronus* of Egypt, claimed as his personal spoil of war, giving him de facto rule over all Egypt as a man has over his own slaves and estates. Not only did he control the legions and the navy, he also controlled the grain that fed Rome, and that gave him an edge when it came to dealing with the Senate. Antonius and Cleopatra had already demonstrated the consequences to Rome when the grain ships from Egypt no longer sailed into Italian ports. It led to starvation and angry mobs. The revenue and grain would be vital assets in securing his position.

Every victorious general name's his own terms, and his terms were simple – he wanted to control the Empire and to Romanise the world. He wanted to build a legacy that would endure forever. He wanted to control the Senate rather than destroy it, through the Senate he could enjoy legitimacy and the Republic would be the veil that hid his throne. He wanted *imperium maius*, supreme command of all Roman forces and oversight of Rome's foreign policies and provinces.

He could risk everything in a single gambit and seize power by force as Duilius and Agrippa urged him to, and, for a while at least, it would probably work, but he knew the Roman heart would soon sour and plot against him as it does all tyrants. The Patient way was what was needed now, and that required a strong nerve and a firm vision. Caesar had both in abundance. 'Now we must battle in the Senate with words and deeds,' he said. 'And we must win the heart of Rome.'

'You already have Rome's heart, Caesar,' said Agrippa. 'And when they see the grain ships, you'll have their souls too.'

'And I intend to keep them by loving them back, Agrippa,' Caesar responded. 'We must return as Romans delivering victory to the Senate and the People of Rome in humble humility. We must return as benevolent heroes who have destroyed the deadly enemy. There will be no legions crossing the Rubicon this time.'

Duilius and Agrippa exchanged a worried look, men of war cowed by a sure-footed politician wearing a general's garb.

Calvinus was much older than the others – a hero of Pharsalus, where Pompeius Magnus was soundly defeated by Julius Caesar's numerically inferior, but tactically superior forces eighteen years ago. He was a son of the Domitii, an old and influential family of the *ordo patricius*, and one of Caesar's most trusted advisers and closest friends. He was clever and wise and commanded Caesar's spies. Caesar had learned a great deal from Calvinus. Tactics and diplomacy, but above all, calculating patience.

'At least let me take the fleet back to Italy.'

'No, Agrippa,' Caesar said sharply. 'We must do nothing provocative. You're a soldier and you think like a soldier. Now is the time to think like a politician. We

must show Rome that the war is over, and we must show a different sort of strength by going among our enemies in friendship and reconciliation.'

'They're snakes,' said Duilius.

Caesar looked at him. 'Then we will dine with snakes, Duilius, and we will smile at them and flatter them, and if they dare try to bite us, we'll cut off their heads.'