

Next Conquest

Caesar stared down at the battle tank showing the planet Sector Prime with real time data streaming in. It showed the positions of all his ships in his battle group positioned around this planet and the neighboring planets. Sector Prime centered the view as it floated before his eyes, and the ship's positions shifted in the tank as they shifted position in space. They moved into position to effectively blockade the planet and the most likely escape routes out of the system.

When the last ship signaled optimum position, Caesar signaled to Octavius, who patched him through to every communication system; to the planet and the three moons around the planet.

“This is your Emperor, Julius Gaius Caesar, Imperator for Life. To the Citizens of Sector Prime, you have two hours to give up Junius Brutus, traitor to the empire of Rome, his second in command, John of Gliese and the cell leaders. If you do this, Sector Prime will be spared the destruction of war and taken back into the fold of the empire with all that entails. If you do not, Sector Prime will be taken back into the empire by force. One way or the other, the planet and its neighbors will rejoin us. You have two hours to think about my offer. Your time starts now.”

Caesar signaled by a chop of the hand and Octavius cut the connection.

The two hours passed with those around Caesar finalizing details for the attack, knowing full well they would have to revise them once the first boots actually hit Sector Prime soil. Caesar remained a solid, quiet presence throughout the chaos around him. He seemed almost like Cassandra in his certainty of being. But the seer was nowhere to be seen at this time. Caesar smiled slightly at the thought of Cassandra. She personified serenity and discomfort all in one.

Seconds ticked down to approach zero with still no word from the planet. It was then she finally walked through the door, calm, with her robes sweeping the decking. She seemed not to walk, but to glide as she positioned herself on his left.

“Initiate orbital bombardment of selected areas,” Caesar said. “Ready the legions for ground assault once the bombardment has softened them up.” Octavius passed the order to General Mikel Ferrault who commanded the legions, who assigned the centuries of each legion to a sector, with several in reserve; though he would not make planet fall with even a single cohort until the bombardment had softened the resistance. Scans had showed many railguns capable of shooting down any ship entering atmosphere to land.

He watched the bombardment proceed for a moment, then switched the visual from the orbital view to that to one inside the ship and the centurions readying for battle in the belly of the Conquest. They were well organized, he’d seen to that throughout the generations, they were well paid, well respected, well fed and well trained. He’d adopted many practices from other cultures and from many that had never existed in his reality.

The sergeants yelled at their cohorts and the newest soldiers to get their gear in order, and the calmness of the veterans as they strapped on their armor seeped outward to calm the newest soldier. The calm of the veterans helped even an officer who strapped on the longer sword, the spatha, as he struggled with the belt hook. A sergeant moving throughout, stopped at the officer, helped him and moved on smoothly as if she had done this a thousand times. She paused to help an enlisted strap on the gladius. All readied their assault rifles and made sure they carried enough ammo. Caesar turned his attention away.

He had readied himself in the same battle attire earlier. He glanced at Octavius who was also similarly attired and ready to join the battle on the ground at a moment’s notice. His glance

soon rested on Cassandra in her flowing Trojan robes, loose sleeved with only a few ornaments around her neck.

She never joined him in battle, not for a long time, not since they were still earth bound, and struggling to unite the planet under his rule. Africa had been a problem, but like the savages of the new world, they battled amongst themselves as much as with the conquerors. Brutus had gained a semblance of control then, off in the new world, the Americas – but it hadn't lasted.

Like the current rebellion wouldn't last.

Even if it lasted centuries, it was limited to someone who lived forever, and to someone who lasted millennia, and he had and he will live forever.

His empire had gone through many such rebellions and metamorphoses: Expanding-growing-shifting, but always expanding by colonizing. Colonization – throughout the millennia have always caused him consternation, as groups set off out of his control, but he always brought them back into the Roman, his, Empire.

“Do you think they will capitulate after the orbital bombardment?” asked Octavius.

General Ferrault glanced quickly at Caesar then met eyes with Octavius and both quickly glanced at Cassandra. She remained silent, aloof.

Caesar ignored the glances so long as they continued their jobs. He had no need to consult with Cassandra as they had already discussed the assault, and he knew what he would see, what they saw when they saw Cassandra at all. Long straight black hair, ageless eyes in a face that seemed not yet twenty and yet sixty at the same time, holding all the knowledge of the universe. And she would open her mouth and say -

Now he glanced her way.

She already looked at him, locking her eyes onto his. “I would say, Caesar, that this battle does not end the war, it only adds to the many on your list, and it only adds to your empire.”

Again, he felt himself hear her words, and did not want to listen to what she actually said. Like always, his will won out, and he forced himself to truly listen. Octavius, the nearby Praetorians, the general, even Captain Sallen – seemed as if they didn’t want to hear her at all.

“No, Octavius, this planet will not capitulate without boots on the ground. We will go down there.”

#

Julius stood in full body armor, covered in blood and his gladius in hand. The ammo to his assault rifle had run out long before, and his armor now sported new dents from enemy attacks.

He looked down at one such dent from a slash of an enemy sword. It had gotten close, but Caesar had prevailed. He always prevailed, though it had been many years since he had fought hand to hand in battle, but with his quarry too close he had to make sure. And it was exhilarating, a sense of living; the possibility of dying. For one who had lived for millennia, the prospect of dying was a thrill, even though with his Praetorian guards around that prospect was a hard one to fathom.

The battle on Sector Prime now over, he studied the aftermath, lips pressed together, eyes squinted, grim. Even after full orbital assault, it had taken weeks to still the insurgents and the remnants of Brutus’ Army, and he still didn’t know. Now the uncertainty gripped him, what if *he* had escaped? What if *he* was still out in the universe?

Octavius came up to join Caesar, flanked by his own Praetorian bodyguards. Caesar noted that Octavius’ armor was covered in splatter, dirty, dented and he still held the AR 97 in

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his hands. He stopped a few feet from Julius and doffed his helm. It took him out of communications with the rest of the legion on the ground and those in orbit, but it was a habit of a long lifetime. His hand ran through his slightly damp hair, also habit, the helmet kept the body temp controlled. "I've sent Centuries 1 through 5 back and brought up the reserves for clean-up operations."

"Any word on Brutus?" Julius asked as he always asked. After a moment's silence, he looked at his adopted son, staring him down. Octavius shook his head.

"No, nothing."

Brutus cannot escape again! The only sign of his agitation was his fist tightening on the hilt of his sword. "Continue as you are and send me word immediately if he is spotted."

Octavius saluted, slid his helm on and headed toward the reserve centuries to continue the search for Brutus.

Hours passed in the search, the reserves soon fell into battle which saw Julius helping in the cleanup operation, his frustration evident in his kills. Soon even that died down to nothing, and there was no one left to fight. And no sign of Brutus.

Julius carefully cleaned his blade before sliding it home in its sheath. His Praetorian guard fell into step behind him. He flicked on communications accessing a link up to his ship, the command ship of the battle group, Conquest. The efficient communications technician routed him to the bridge and Captain Callen. "Any craft escape the blockade, Captain?"

"No sir. We had three try during the battle, but none escaped. One destroyed. The other two boarded successfully."

"And?"

"No sign of Brutus."

Julius cut the connection. Callen was an efficient and capable captain, one that Caesar had gifted with everlasting life, and one the captain had accepted and continued to run his flagship. If there was no sign of Brutus, there was no sign of Brutus.

Brutus had to be here! He had to! Either dead or in hiding or intelligence had failed and Brutus was never here. Brutus' own intelligence had leaked and spread the rumor.

Even if he wasn't here, Julius was closing in and Brutus had less and less room to hide. And the planet of Sector Prime, once again under his control, had been brought back into the empire. His empire.

#

Cassandra sighed, watching the readouts streaming in on the battle from the bridge. She was always accorded respect and space to watch each battle, but there was always a quiet circle around her, there always was, had been, will be.

They respected her, but feared her equally. She'd brought immortality to the great Caesar.

She sighed again knowing Caesar would be coming for her. She left the bridge, battle over, she wasn't needed. Even though in all the years Captain Callen had commanded, only thrice had she asked for Cassandra's help, and listened and each time saving her crew and Caesar.

Brutus wasn't on Sector Prime; he had been, but no longer. Caesar would want to know how. The past he always asked about and that she could tell without ramifications, always could. It was the future no one believed her on, except him and that, only rarely. He never pushed it by demanding too much, and always carefully considered what she foresaw for him.

However, with Brutus, he lost his intellectual reasoning, becoming emotional, losing his calm detachment. Brutus was the betrayer, so he never asked the future regarding Brutus, knowing he wouldn't listen to her. But the past, knowing how Brutus avoided capture, how he escaped; Caesar learned, studied and was drawing the noose closer and tighter around Brutus' neck. Each battle brought that closer, each move on the chessboard that was the empire of a thousand planets, brought it closer to checkmate.

Cassandra left the bridge and the quiet circle swirled around her even as she left. After so many thousands of years, she was used to the solitude. She always had her escort, Praetorians loyal to Caesar, but she moved as if they were not so much guards as guardians. She headed for the viewport that Caesar preferred, knowing his after battle habits. He would be there soon enough. And by that time, not so hot tempered, even if Brutus had escaped.

But this time, again, he slipped out. She knew this, knew why, as much as he hated Brutus, he loved the man too, always had. Since the first, it was the reason Caesar had pardoned Brutus the first time, pardoned his best friend when he tried to assassinate him during the Ides. So long ago. And it was not the first time had Brutus fomented rebellion, had escaped, been captured, returned to the fold, only to see Caesar reach too far, demand too much and then leave to start the rebellions all over again.

The first time, he had remained in jail a long time, Caesar granting him eternal life to extend his torment, but Caesar had wavered first and let Brutus out thinking the man followed him and was loyal to him. He had been for a time. Until, operations began in the new world and then Brutus had left, gained popularity and led revolutions along the borders. The second had been harder to bring him back into the fold, as he had given Brutus control over the new world in the first place. The rebellion that had happened there, had been long and hard fought, though

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Caesar had won; it only set the stage for when humankind had first colonized their nearby planets. Mars, Mars had been even longer in retaking than the new world. And one of the last ones where Caesar trusted Brutus, had the man locked in a cell on that red planet for centuries as Caesar colonized and united the thousand habitable planets-after the second exodus.

#

The starship, engines kicking to life, pushed the ship ever farther away from the war devastated planet. Julius stood in the observatory, not looking back, never looking back, but staring ahead at the next. He stared far ahead at the next rebellious planet, the next conquest in his search for absolute solidarity, in his campaign to unite the known universe under one power; his power.

He heard a soft sigh behind him and glanced at the reflection. Cassandra waited for him, had waited for him like this after every battle. She still wore the accoutrements of her homeland, long forgotten as humanity fled to the stars, searching for a peace he would finally bring.

“What have you foreseen?” he asked. He always asked.

“Another battle fought, another war won, and yourself still no closer to the ultimate victory you seek.”

“Why? Why is that?” he asked more to himself.

“It’s-”

He held up a hand to forestall her. “I know what you will say. I have no need of prognostication to know. You have said it from the first: it is the Cassandra Complex. But that is not why you had Octavius bring you to me all those millennia ago.”

“No.”

“No.” He finally turned to face her. “You came to me, because, one of these days – maybe a hundred years from now, maybe five hundred, maybe a thousand, in the chaos brought by battle, death will come. For one who sees the future, immortality is easy, boredom is not.” He crossed over to her and brushed past, whispering, “It will not come yet. I still have need of you and you of me.”

The door snicked open and the Praetorians on the other side fell into step behind him. He left Cassandra to her thoughts as he felt the starship enter hyperspace. He only hesitated within his mind. She stood behind him and Julius always focused ahead.

His boot heels rang on the decking at the exact time as the Praetorians. The gravity in the ship was that of Earth; he neither cared how or why it worked only that it did. The next turn took him to the combat center. One of those guards beside the door opened it before he got there and his Praetorians took up position with the two stationed beside the door.

The door closed behind him and the lights lowered back to where they’d been before he entered. Octavius stood on the other side of the battle tank. His adopted son smiled through the projection to him.

“Well met, Emperor.”

Julius nodded to the one man he trusted above all others. The one man who had brought Cassandra to him and the first man he trusted with the secret of immortality that Cassandra had entrusted upon him; the one man who had stood beside him in battle after battle.

“Well met, my son. What brings you here?”

“I am paring down the choices of our next move. New information has come in, before our entry into hyperspace. I have news, father.”

“Go on.”

“There has been word on Brutus.”

Brutus. Julius breathed deeply, calming himself. “Where?” he tallied in his mind the available troops and support ships he had and in what sectors.

“Marc Anthony.”

“What?”

“Our informant says Brutus was there, had visited with Anthony and Cleopatra. He did not say where Brutus headed next, but it can’t have been far.”

Julius ran a hand over his balding head. He’d heard that technology could replace the lost hair, but then how would anyone know him for Caesar otherwise? He counseled himself to patience. Over the many millennia, he hoped he had learned patience, but inaction never sat well with him.

“Get me a connection with General Anthony.”

“At once.” His adopted son turned and began adjusting controls.

This betrayal hurt. Exactly like the time Brutus tried to assassinate him on the Ides of March. If it hadn’t been for Cassandra, and he actually believing her, he would be long dead, long dead and his empire forgotten. He remembered it well.

#

The successful crossing of the Tiber River with his army occurred that day. Soon, soon he would declare the Republic dead and himself as Dictator for life.

Now he stalked the streets of Rome, in full battle armor surrounded by his loyal friends Marcus and Octavius. Beyond them were his guards and leaders of his army. Beyond them cheered the citizens of Rome.

Cheered for him!

There were others beyond who waited with hatred and he would deal with them in time. Fierce passion burned in those hearts, most of that burned in the hearts of the senators.

A voice cut through the constant sound of cheering. How had she gotten so close?

“Caesar, be on your guard against great peril on the day of the month of March you Romans call the Ides.” He glanced at the woman, young, beautiful with long dark hair. She did not hide, did not cheer and looked him boldly in the eyes. Here was one who knew power.

He walked on, dismissing her. Then he stopped. He turned to Octavius, whispering into his ear. Octavius tapped his fist over his breastplate in salute and went to do as he was bid. Julius nodded, walking on. Even if victorious on the battlefield, one can still lose one’s life if careless. Julius was not careless. He glimpsed the woman walk over to Octavius before Julius’ procession rounded a street corner.

Later that day, he stood in his atrium and watched as Octavius led this seer to him. She walked with grace, unhurried. She said not a word when she arrived, gazing at him as if she had heard it all before. There was something timeless about her, an ageless quality like Minerva. He had never met a woman un-awed by his presence. Even his wife had never showed this quality. It intrigued him more than he understood.

“What is this peril you speak of?”

“You will hear me out?” she asked. “You will not dismiss lightly what I tell you?”

Even her voice carried an air of timelessness, young and old. Yet the woman who stood before him was no more than twenty summers. “I will hear you and only if your words have merit will they not be dismissed.”

She smiled slightly. “Merit not only to you, Caesar. I have seen a great many things, foretold the rise and fall of great men, they fell-”

“Come Seer, what is it you see?” He stood unmoving but impatient.

“I see your death, betrayed by those you think under your control.”

Caesar watched Octavius’ eyes glaze over, his attention turning away from the woman. His eyes came back to her and he waved a hand as if to shoo a fly. “Death stalks me constantly, and betrayal is a dog at my side, always there.”

She looked sad at his words, deflated though she hadn’t moved. “Wait for the Ides. It may well spell your doom.”

“You will stay here until that time has passed.” He strode off with other matters to attend to; he caught the eyes of Octavius. “See to it.”

The Ides came and he had mostly forgotten about the seer's words. Julius had no wish to linger in his villa. He was to meet with the senators but she stepped in front of him, blocking his path. She stared at him, timeless and impassive. It caught his attention as it had the first time. He smiled at the seer who had never given her name.

“The Ides of March have come,” he stated.

“Aye, Caesar,” she replied, “but not gone.”

She walked off and he was left alone to head to the senate, but he paused at the threshold. Why did her words trouble him so? He slipped on his purple toga, then slipped it back off. He smiled at his thoughts. He hadn’t advanced here to become dictator for life by being incautious when it mattered.

His armor felt more comfortable under his toga. He sent Octavius to gather a cohort from his army. It was a good plan if it worked, otherwise it acted as a readiness exercise.

Caesar left Octavius and the gatherings of a cohort at the last turning. The theater of Pompeii stood to his right and he almost paused in his stride. It would be ironic- no, they would think it appropriate to stop him there.

Movement, as Marcus, an able youth rushed toward him. Was he also part of this or coming to warn Julius? Either way, it validated the seer's prognostication.

Senator Tillius Cimber stepped out from the theater. "Ah, Caesar. We were thinking you wouldn't show. Come, there is much to discuss." The older man led him into a room adjoining the east portico. He took a quick count around the room, nearly sixty senators waited. He knew all of them in one way or another. But one shocked him, even though this was the betrayal the seer had warned: Junius Brutus.

"You had something to discuss, Cimber?" Julius stopped in the middle of the room, surrounded, confident in what was to happen next. Octavius would not fail him, had not yet failed him and he doubted that man ever would.

"Um, yes." The older man handed him the petition and as Julius took it in his right hand, Cimber thrust out with the dagger he had hidden in the folds of his toga.

Caesar dropped the petition grabbing Cimber's wrist, the dagger point stopped by the unexpected armor. "This is violence, Cimber." Julius twisted the wrist back and plucked the dagger from weakened fingers. Fingers never used to rough handling which never held a dagger but to maybe cut his meat with, when a servant or slave was not nearby.

Cimber's eyes flicked over Julius' shoulder. He spun. The dagger thrust by Casca barely missed his neck, but it caught Cimber. Julius let the body fall, using the distraction to grab Casca by the arm. "What is it you think you are doing, Casca, you villain?"

“Help, brothers.” It was all he said before Julius stabbed him in the heart, penetrating between the ribs with a sure stroke.

The other senators started for him. The doors to the portico burst inwards and his men rushed in. His heavily armed and armored men used to violence. Men headed by Octavius and Marcus. Marcus?

Noise and confusion reigned for long minutes, until his shouting drowned out everything else and the fighting slowed. It was a slaughter, with less than half the senators remaining alive. The Ides of March will be forever remembered as the day the senators were killed as they betrayed Caesar, their emperor.

“Take them to holding cells, quietly, Octavius.”

“Aye, Caesar.” Octavius bumped his armored chest with a fist, then directed the cohort to restrain the surviving guilty senators. The soldiers ignored their protests.

Julius glared at Junius Brutus, stopping the soldier escorting the senator. “And you, Brutus?” he asked. “What have you to say for yourself? Has our friendship meant nothing to you? I spared your life when you sided with Pompeii.”

“This is not a Democracy, Caesar, this is Tyranny.”

He motioned the soldier to take his one-time friend away.

#

“We have a connection to New Egypt, Caesar.” He was brought back to the now, by his son’s voice.

“Bring Cassandra here, Octavius.”

He hurried out as Marc Anthony’s face appeared on the screen from half a galaxy away. A slight delay occurred, though it was near instantaneous. He’d found all forms of

communication useful over the years, from telegrams to satellites to the singularity shunts, all of it helped him to process information and to make correct decisions quickly, without misinterpretation, that was so crucial on the battleground.

“Hail, Emperor.”

“General Anthony.” His voice was cold and calm, but his mind raged on what to do. And he thought on Brutus. He would find and destroy Brutus. The door snicked open and Cassandra walked in, timeless, staring across with those eyes that see all. With her help, he’d find Brutus.

Now he had to decide what to do with Anthony and Cleopatra. “What have you to report General?”

“Julius?” the image of his trusted friend frowned at him.

“Don’t play games with me Marcus, I know Brutus was there. Why? When? Where has he gone? Why have you betrayed me so?”

“I-“

“Don’t try and deny it.”

“Never, Emperor.” The other sighed and then said nothing.

“Is it treason then?”

“Never, Emperor.”

“It can’t be both, Marc.”

“He was my friend too, Emperor.”

“You didn’t side with him during the New World Revolution.”

“No, Emperor. I did not.”

“So why now?”

The image of a darkly beautiful woman, with slick black hair and dark rich eyes came onto the screen to join that of Anthony's. "Imperator," she said coldly.

"Cleo." There was silence for a moment and he said, "This isn't the first time you've succored him." It wasn't a question.

"No, Caesar, it is not."

"Put him on!" he growled.

"I am sorry, we cannot," she said. "He has not been here for nearly a month."

That was before he besieged the planet. Before he'd even come out to this sector. "Then where is he?"

"He would not tell us, Caesar."

"Of course not." He closed down the connection before he heard more treason and betrayal from his once lover and once friend.

"What will you do now?" the faint voice asked. He almost forgotten he'd sent for the seer, and she waited by his son's shoulder.

"I will hunt down Brutus!" Caesar pounded a fist into the table and then stomped off, leaving Cassandra and his son to deal, each in their own way. He would find Brutus and he would confront that traitor, and even if it took another thousand years he, Caesar, would see it done.