

"Brilliant...A novel of vivid characters, stunning action and unrelenting pace." — Bernard Cornwell

EMPEROR

THE GATES OF ROME

JOHN IGGULDEN



EMPEROR OF ROME

Volume 1 in the Emperor Series

Conn Iggulden

A DELL BOOK

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A Dell Book

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Praise for

EMPEROR

THE GATES OF ROME

“What Robert Graves did for Claudius, Conn Iggulden now does for the most famous Roman Emperor of them all. This novel is a vibrant blending of historical fact and fiction. If only all history lessons could be this thrilling.”

—William Bernhardt

“*The Gates of Rome* is a big, sumptuous feast of a novel that’s so vividly written I could hear the clang of swords and smell the scent of spice in the air. It had me enthralled from start to finish.”

—Tess Gerritsen

“An absorbing portrait of ancient Roman life and history, well written and full of suspense.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*



EMP

THE GAT

To my son Cameron and to my brother Hal,
the other member of the Black Cat Club

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EMPEROR

THE GATES OF ROME

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CONN IGGULDEN taught English for seven years before becoming a full-time writer. He is married with a son and lives in Hertfordshire, England. *Emperor: The Gates of Rome* is his first novel.

CHAPTER 1

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 unrecognizable 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 riverbed 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 tilt 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 neighbors' part of the woods. He should have recognized 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 neighboring 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, Tonus, 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's 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's 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 heavyset boy paused in throwing the twine over a second branch.

"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's 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's hands tremble.

"I'll go first and show you how it's done," Gaius had said cheerfully, launching himself feetfirst 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 had 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's spinning thoughts: "Gentlemen, meat must be tenderized with mallets. Take your stations and begin the technique, like so."

He swung his stick at Gaius's 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 gray 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 bluish 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 cornfields, 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's father said he was one in a thousand for organizing 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.