

# Some Are Born Great

by Ed McWatt

*from 'Six Nasty, Brutish and Short Stories from Ancient Rome'*

[www.edmcwatt.com](http://www.edmcwatt.com)

Copyright 2018

The faint semi-circle of the waning moon hung high in the August sky, in defiance of the morning sun. Far below, the short line of riders picked their way carefully down a rocky ravine, the ocean's distant glimmering pulling them towards the valley's end and escape.

The lead rider stopped abruptly and raised his arm in warning. The line hovered in uncertainty and fear behind him.

'What is it?' hissed the second horseman. He was close to sixty, though his hair still grew into the luxuriant peak of a quiff at his forehead. A tattered purple cloak was the one jarring note against the drab travelling clothes he wore. The lead rider did not answer, but sat still in the saddle, head cocked, listening. Seconds passed.

"Well?" the older man eventually demanded, his voice a mix of impatience and nervousness.

The guide twisted his body slowly round and waited just long enough to hint at disdain.

"Probably just a rockslide somewhere above us in the valley, Pompey Magnus."

He gestured at the scree-covered slopes of the ravine before nudging his heels into his horse's flank and trotting forwards. The line of tired men continued their cautious path along the dried-up stream bed that wound down towards the safety of the sea.

Pompey looked around for his freedman, Philip, and waved him forwards from the back of the line.

"Magnus?"

"Where did you say you found this Greek?"

"Among those fleeing camp when Caesar's cavalry broke through." His master's face flickered in irritation at the mention of the name.

"He was working as a guide for the Third Legion..."

Pompey considered this but said nothing, his eyes blank and distant. Philip plunged on.

"He knows the country. We wouldn't have found this discreet path without him."

The silence stretched again until Philip felt he had to fill it.

“But I agree, his insolence is not acceptable. I will speak to him harshly, Magnus.”

“Do no such thing, Philip!” The old man’s animated reply caused the rider ahead to look back. He lowered his voice before continuing. “Do nothing. Just - just keep him in your eye, that is all.” Philip nodded and urged his horse further up the line towards the guide.

The attack came shortly before the sun had reached the top of its climb, while the promised security of the valley’s mouth was still a mile off. Six men on horseback sat watching from the ridge to their right, their horses steaming in the morning’s heat. Having picked up the trail last night, they had pushed their mounts hard to catch up and work their way undetected around the reverse slope. Now they were ahead, with the height and the upper hand. The sun danced off their helmets and spears as Pompey’s small group argued about what to do.

“You must make a break for it, sir” his adjutant was insisting, playing the sacrificial role Rome expected of a junior officer. “We can hold them off while you get to a boat.” In the distance, seemingly placed by the gods to taunt them, a sail was visible far out to sea.

Philip added his weight to the officer’s argument. “We have the numbers, Magnus. We can catch you up once we’ve dealt with them.”

Their Greek guide shifted in his saddle uncomfortably. “Whatever you decide to do old man, do it now. There will be more men coming.”

Pompey looked at him for a second, eyes full of scorn, before giving his order.

“I won’t run. Hand me a spear.” His men looked at each other, uncertain of how to respond.

Pompey snapped at them. “I didn’t run from Cinna, I didn’t run from Domitius, nor Spartacus, nor any of the thousand enemies I’ve faced and beaten in the last forty years. I won’t run from six green legionaries now.”

“You ran from their boss” the Greek remarked with a smirk.

The junior officer placed his hand on his sword hilt and reacted angrily. "Our luck was bitter yesterday!" he shot back. "The gods were against us. You'd know that if you hadn't been skulking behind the lines."

The guide shrugged the insult off, merely pointing at the men above them, who had begun to descend. "They are coming."

Pompey gritted his teeth and repeated his order in a snarl.

"Hand me a spear."

\* \* \* \* \*

Philip laid his hand over the adjutant's white face, fingertips closing the eyelids.

"He has passed, Magnus."

Pompey appeared not to hear. He was scanning the ridge lines on both sides of the valley for any sign of more of Caesar's men. The bodies of their six attackers were strung out down the hill, lying where they had fallen, mixed with five from their own group. His dismounted men had formed a solid wall of shields and spears and, once the initial charge had thundered over them, had gradually overcome the attackers one by one. But not without cost.

Philip tried again. "They must have been an advanced patrol - they wouldn't have attacked in such small numbers if they had more men coming up."

Pompey grunted noncommittally and pulled his purple cloak more tightly around him. He felt chilled despite the heat of the Greek late summer. Remembering something, he turned his head in Philip's direction and noticed the officer's body at his feet for the first time.

"Good man" he said to no-one in particular. "But what of the guide? Where'd he go?"

Philip pointed back up the valley. "West again, the way we came. Took off as soon as we were all engaged. Shall I send one of the men after him?"

Pompey shook his head.

"We don't need him. Let's just find that boat."

"But he knows where we're headed. He'll sell us out to the rebels as soon as he can find them. We have to -"

"No time, Philip" Pompey interrupted, laying a fatherly hand on his long-suffering servant's arm. "Nothing to be done but keep moving forward." He swung himself back onto his horse with the practiced ease of a man who had spent his life in the saddle. The effort caused him to grimace from the pain of his aching joints, unseen by any of his surviving men. He sat up straight and painted a resolved smile onto his face.

The five remaining riders reached the shore a few minutes later, their speed increasing as the terrain flattened to grassy scrub. The sea's shimmer invited them to stop, to rest and to relax, but they turned and pushed on, following the beach south in search of transport. A strong wind swept the sand continually along the shore and buffeted the men's ears. Deep into the afternoon, with several miles of beach covered and no hint of their pursuers, Pompey's ragged band stopped at the first sign of civilisation they had seen all day. A fisherman's ramshackle wooden hut, bleached and battered by the wind and rain, squatted a few feet above the tide line. At the sound of their approach, an equally weathered woman emerged from within and folded her arms stoutly.

"Is your master about?" Philip shouted in Greek as they drew closer. The woman nodded in the direction of the sea.

"I've no master, young man, but my sons aren't far off." Philip looked towards the spot she had indicated and saw a small boat working its way to shore in the teeth of the tide and wind. An hour later and it was being pulled up the beach by the sons, two men in their

mid-twenties, hardened and sunburned by the life of fishermen. They nodded warily at the men and stood protectively in front of their mother. Pompey took the initiative and stepped forward with a smile.

“No need to worry, boys. We’re not here to do any harm or to take what isn’t ours.” Three pairs of skeptical eyes stared back, long used to being robbed by every passing unit of the Roman army.

“On the contrary,” Pompey persisted, “I’d like to pay you. Twice.” This got the young men’s attention and they shifted their body language slightly from ‘defensive’ to ‘unimpressed’.

“Firstly for your inconvenience, for it’s now getting late and I fear we must trespass on your hospitality.” The listeners seemed confused. Philip bit his bottom lip to stop himself interjecting with something plainer than his master’s florid, showy words. Pompey tried again:

“We’d like to pay to stay in your, er, your home tonight. It’s going to be dark soon.”

The elder brother spoke for the first time to name the price. “A drachma.”

Pompey resisted the urge to laugh out loud. “You drive a hard bargain, fisherman, but I accept” he said with mock-graciousness.

“And the second thing?”

“I need to hire you to get me out there -” Pompey inclined his head towards the water which lapped ceaselessly on the shore. “I have to find a sea-going ship, and I need your boat to reach one. You can have our horses as payment.”

The brothers conferred in whispers while Pompey calculated how long it would take the next patrol of Caesar’s cavalry to find this place. A day? Surely no longer.

“And two drachma” they announced to his relief. Perhaps his luck was turning, he thought, as he ordered Philip to pay them.

\* \* \* \* \*

They left at the very break of day, the paling of the stars the only hint of the coming dawn.

Two hours with a tail wind and the brothers' backs bending at the oars took the five Romans out into open sea, their land-bound pursuers all but forgotten. The deeper water thronged with merchant traffic, just as Pompey knew it would.

"It's been thirty years," he announced to the boat's other passengers, "since I swept the sea of pirates. Now look at it - absolutely thriving. They said it couldn't be done. But I knew it just needed coordination and ruthlessness." No one replied. "Coordination and ruthlessness" Pompey repeated to himself, lost in memories.

"What about this one?" Philip asked, pointing to a galley hurrying south. "Looks like it might be Egyptian?" Pompey studied it for a moment before answering.

"Not one of his, at any rate - it'll do."

\* \* \* \* \*

Peticus was in a buoyant mood. His ship was making excellent time down the Greek coast and it looked like the weather would provide another day of better-than-expected progress towards their destination. Three more days like this would see his hold full of Byzantine cloth and glassware safely unloaded onto the wharves of Salamis. The worrying rumours of a coming clash between the two factions' navies had amounted to nothing. Peticus had no interest in the squabbles of the rich, just as long as he could go about his business unhindered. He stared out at the sea's horizon glittering in the morning sun and felt sure that this day would be a profitable one.

His lookout's shout broke into Peticus's thoughts and he spun towards the coastline to see what had alarmed him. A small fishing boat, dangerously over-filled with men, was trying to

intercept their course. It's passengers were standing and waving their cloaks, hollering something he couldn't quite hear. Sighing to himself, Peticus ordered the ship to slow and come about. He peered over the edge of his ship as the curious crew drew near. Figures resolved into faces and Peticus had the unnerving feeling that he knew the shabbily-dressed man with the purple cloak... No, it couldn't be, surely? That would be too ridiculous. He'd only seen him once before, years ago when the man had triumphed through Rome following his victory over Mithridates... but the quiff, the cloak, the man's demeanor - they were unmistakable.

This could only mean the war had shifted decisively in Caesar's favour. And that Pompey was on the way down, he concluded.

"Your boat in trouble?" Peticus shouted, suspiciously. The sea was as calm as a lake that morning.

"None," Pompey yelled back, "But what news have you of the battle? Do you know if Caesar or Pompey Magnus prevailed?"

The captain was confused by the question before he began to understand the man's tactic. He pretended to grow annoyed.

"You stopped me for news? We're straight out of Byzantium and have seen no battle, sailor. Now may I continue? I'm due in Cyprus in four days' time."

"Excellent!" enthused the Roman below, having established the captain's ignorance and neutrality. "Luck is smiling on both of us, it seems."

Peticus did not share this enthusiasm.

"Make yourself plain, man" he shouted down. "You've already cost me time. Last chance!"

"Take us with you. We'll pay five hundred denarii" Philip blurted out, scared that his master's long-windedness would cost them their lives. Pompey turned to give his former slave a hard stare.



Peticus weighed the opportunity against the risk for a heartbeat and decided that he'd take Pompey's money just as soon as Caesar's. "Drop the anchor and get the rope ladder!" he ordered over his shoulder.

The two brothers at the oars below looked at each other dumbfounded at what they'd just heard.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You must try not to let him get under your skin, Magnus" Philip advised, helping Pompey pin his cloak across his shoulders. It was the only surviving part of his dull travel outfit and underneath it he now wore the formal, intricate armour of a Roman general. They'd docked at the port city of Mytilene that morning, after Peticus had agreed to divert for the price of another hundred denarii.

"Easier said than done!" Pompey half-joked. "The man would vex a Vestal". It was true, Piso had gained a reputation for pettiness and cowardice long before the Senate appointed him as Greece's governor. And he had been governing from the distant safety of the island of Lesboa ever since Caesar set foot on the mainland of his province.

The freedman stepped back and looked at the tatty purple cloak with a critical eye. It was torn in several places and salt-stained from its latest adventure.

"Are you sure about the cloak, Magnus?"

"Quite sure, thank you Philip" came the clipped reply. He understood why. Pompey had been flattered by some shyster into believing the cloak had originally belonged to Alexander the Great, some three hundred years ago. It had barely been off his back in the ten years since

he'd found it on campaign in the East. But it really didn't do its wearer any favours - those who didn't know its story assumed he was too cheap to replace it. Those who *did* thought him too vain. The nickname 'Great' had started as sarcastic insult thrown by his rivals at his pride, but like the cloak, he'd worn it so long that he had made it his own. Now he was Pompey Magnus.

"Let's go, Philip, daylight's wasting" the great man chided, bounding from his quarters in the direction of the Governor's office like a man twenty years younger than the one who had clambered, dripping and aching, onto Peticus's ship.

The airy hall in which the Governor carried out his official duties was filled with petitioners and hangers-on, and a hazy sense of indolence. Piso slouched in his curule chair a little too much like a king of old, Pompey thought. He would fix that once he had dealt with the more pressing emergency at hand. All in good time.

"Piso!" he exclaimed warmly, striding towards the dais, arms outstretched. The Governor did not rise and Pompey stopped two paces short, lest he be forced to mount the steps and pull Piso bodily out of his official chair. His grin waned to a cautious smile and he altered his approach. Piso's hawk-like face was difficult to read.

"It's been a while since we were both in the same room. Probably the Senate session when you were given your imperium. A motion I supported, if memory serves?"

"Greetings, Pompey" Piso said flatly, ignoring the implied debt of gratitude. He had dropped the 'Magnus' from Pompey's name and its owner was too proud to pick it up. "Why have you come into my province unbidden?"

Pompey flinched like he'd been slapped. *Unbidden?* Who did this failed politician think he was talking to? He felt his hopes wither further - this would be harder than he had planned.

“The Senate’s province, Piso, let us never forget that. I am here at their command, as are you.”

“I’m amazed they are able to command anything, Pompey. From what I’ve heard in the past three days, you’ve thrown away their last army, despite outnumbering Caesar two to one.” Pompey was taken aback by how openly rude the Governor was being. He felt his cheeks turning red.

“Now listen Piso, I’ve heard it said that you are a weak man, but I never imagined you’d be one to simply blow with the wind. The future of the Republic won’t be decided by a single battle, certainly not one against a self-serving little rebel like Caesar.”

“Really? What have you got left to fight the next one with?”

“We have our navy - huge, powerful, undefeated - and the loyalty of every Governor outside Gaul.” He paused ominously on this final point.

“And yet you arrive in a single ship, having left with five hundred.”

“The confusion of battle makes hitch-hikers of us all” said Pompey, brushing past the barb.

“And our navy took no part in this latest struggle. Perhaps it should have? Who knows? But here we are.” Piso allowed Pompey to continue uninterrupted.

“I’ve come for two reasons, both of which are well known to you. Firstly, the army will be rebuilt. You will do your duty and assist with this. And secondly, my wife and children are on the island. They are safe, I trust?”

If Piso was insulted by the implication that he’d harm women and children, he hid it well.

“Naturally, Pompey. I am only surprised you did not go to meet them before seeing me.”

“Every hour is important in the Republic’s struggle to crush its enemies, Piso. My interests will always come second to that.”

“Once you’ve visited the city armourer, naturally” Piso jeered, nodding at Pompey’s new outfit. The general could have pointed out that saving the Republic would require him to

dress the part, that support from its allies wouldn't be granted to a someone who looked like a tramp, but he swallowed his anger and pressed on.

"So, to my primary purpose, Piso - the Senate's army. I am going to need your legion."

Piso gave a bitter laugh. "My legion? You stripped it bare last Spring before you threw them to Caesar's wolves. I can spare you two Centuries at most." Pompey's brimming temper started to trickle over the dam of his self-control.

"Two centuries? What am I to do with that handful?"

The man stared back at him but made no comment. This only angered Pompey more and his voice rose.

"Do you mean to defy the Senate?" he barked. Piso began to reply but Pompey shouted over him.

"Your imperium here lasts only another few months, Piso. After that, you'll be treated like any other citizen if you do not stand with us now. You know what that means, don't you? You'll be an enemy of the state, denied shelter or food within four hundred miles of the city."

Piso waited for his guest's anger to ebb before giving his answer.

"I cannot give what I do not have. You may think that you can just stamp your foot and new legions will rise up from the ground to serve the famous Pompey Magnus," - Philip winced at the reference to one of his master's famous boasts - "but the reality is different."

Pompey had heard enough and was through crossing words with his inferiors. With two deliberate steps he advanced on Piso and grabbed his tunic with both hands, finally forcing him to stand. His bellow of moments earlier was now replaced by a threatening growl.

"I'm going to take all the legionaries left on this island, Piso. Then I'm going to call in the favours owed to me by every pharaoh, king, satrap and village chieftain whose arse I've saved over the years. When I've crushed Caesar, I'll be back to settle accounts with you."

He released Piso's clothing and the man fell back into his Governor's chair with a thump.

Pompey stalked out of the chamber, snapping at Philip to keep up. The freedman threw a glance back at Piso as they reached the door, and saw that the man was smiling. He ran to catch his master.

"I don't think we are Piso's first visitors", he whispered urgently.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pompey finally felt a little more like his old self, watching the island slowly shrink in the ship's wake. Properly dressed, at the head of a modest squadron of military vessels, his wife and children safe in their cabin below, he could breathe at last. A few other fleeing officers had washed up on Lesboa during the days it took to assemble his makeshift fleet, so that Pompey now had a senior staff of sorts with which to consult. Most importantly, the frenzied action and alarm of escape had subsided and his normal clarity of thought returned. Now he could set about making a plan.

He turned his back on the receding view of Mytilene harbour and its obstructive governor and made his way unsteadily along the rolling deck. Beneath the main mast, a large table had been nailed into place and Pompey took his seat at its head, banked by his military advisors. Glancing to both sides, he was underwhelmed by what he saw. Two of the three officers were cavalry commanders - it was their utter failure in the battle on which his defeat had swung. And anyway, Pompey reasoned, how much use can these men be while we have no horses? The third officer was of more practical use - an infantry man, but young and inexperienced.

"Remind me of your command, Favonius" Pompey said affably, hoping that his doubts were not obvious to the others.

"I had two cohorts at Pharsalus, Magnus" the man replied.

A thousand men, Pompey thought, heart sinking. He smiled back. "I remember now, in the centre? They fought well. You must be one of Scipio's men."

The young man glowed with the pride of recognition. Gods help us, Pompey thought, he's little more than a child.

Philip occupied the fifth chair, for want of anyone else to fill it. "Read back the roster"

Pompey instructed him. Philip opened his notes and, for what felt like the tenth time, recited the count of the troops currently at the disposal of Pompey the Great.

"Six centuries of regulars, mostly Piso's Twelfth -"

Pompey corrected him ("The senate's Twelfth") and then nodded for Philip to continue.

"- and remnants of the Third and Tenth. Somewhere close to three-hundred auxiliaries, mostly locals, mostly slingers."

The General's mouth formed into a tight line.

"And seven crewed galleys, two of which have their archers." Philip closed his wax tablet with a snap that he instantly regretted. No matter how many times he read this list out loud, the numbers didn't get any larger. The three officers around the table all looked to their leader.

"It's a start," Pompey declared cheerfully, "but no more than that. We are going to need to move quickly and add strength just as fast if the Republic is to survive that madman Caesar."

The men all made polite noises of agreement but offered no solutions. Pompey looked at each in turn before announcing his decision.

"So we are going to go east, to Parthia where my great friend King Arsaces rules over millions - and has an army to match. Caesar has spent the past decade terrorising the provinces he was given, I've spent mine making alliances. His violence and greed will be his downfall, you will soon see."

A silence followed where he was expecting enthusiasm.

“What is it?” Pompey asked after an awkward second.

Philip saw that none of the officers was likely to speak their mind first, unused to this elevated position at Pompey’s side, so he spoke for them.

“Parthia, Magnus? It seems...”

“Like the only sensible option” Pompey finished.

Philip frowned. “Like a very long way to go... Can we afford the time?”

“Nonsense, man - with this weather we’ll be off the coast of Syria in a couple of weeks.

Scipio’s governor there and he hates Caesar with a burning passion. I admit, it’s a month across the desert from there, but -”

“We haven’t seen Scipio since the battle, Magnus” Philip reminded him. “We don’t know if he’s even alive, least of all back in Syria.”

“That’s true” confirmed Favonius. “I’ve no idea what became of him once the rout began.”

“Do you know who he left in charge back in his province?” Philip asked.

The soldier nodded. “His procurator, as we took all the officers with us when we shipped out.

He was the most senior rank left.”

“And what kind of man is he?”

The infantryman shrugged. “Like all procurators - only interested in the money.”

Pompey put his head in his hands briefly before recovering his composure. He had been beaten again.

“It’s wise not to plan on receiving his support, then.” Seeing confusion on his officers’ faces, he explained.

“Caesar wins his wars away from battlefields as much as on them. It seems like he got to Piso here -” he jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the green line of Lesboa behind them “-

and if I were him, I'd try to buy the loyalty of the man who guards the way to Parthia as well. He knows how much support I have there."

Silence returned, broken only by the sound of the bow thumping into each wave.

"There is an alternative, sir" said one of the cavalry officers, speaking up for the first time.

"Spain?" Pompey assumed, mind leaping back to his first real campaign, thirty five years ago. "Not wise. Until we know the status of the senate's navy, I can't risk getting so close to Italy. If Caesar's men capture me, it will all be over."

"No, sir - Africa."

"I don't have allies there, Lentulus" Pompey said, waving his hand in dismissal.

"Precisely. It's the last move Caesar would expect you to make."

Philip spoke out in support of the cavalryman's idea. "Lentulus is right, Magnus. It's close too - five days south, perhaps six."

"And what am I to do when I get there? Raise the ghosts of Carthage to ride out against the rebels? I don't have allies there!" Pompey repeated, frustration creeping into his voice.

"I'm sorry sir, I'm not making myself clear. Before Greece, I served in Egypt as one of our military advisors to their boy king."

"Ptolemy? We'll find no help there. He's too busy fighting his sister for the throne."

"Indeed, and without outside assistance, he'll be at war with Cleopatra for years. That's the crack you might be able to drive a wedge into."

Pompey listened for the first time in the past few minutes and considered the vision Lentulus had just described. Rome had been helping the little Pharaoh unofficially but had never committed troops before now, happy to keep Egypt divided and weak.

"His father owed a lot to me... Perhaps. Yes, perhaps. An agreement to concentrate our forces and kill off our mutual enemies one at a time..."



Lentulus smiled that his suggestion had survived Pompey's critical eye. The scene was interrupted by appearance of Pompey's youngest son, who emerged from the steps and tore down the deck chased by his older brother. Shrieking, he lept in to his father's arms for protection. Cornelia followed close behind and grabbed the other boy by his shoulders. "Apologies, husband, gentlemen" she murmured, ashamed at the noise and disruption. "They're just bored down there."

"I think I may have a solution to that, boys!" Pompey beamed. "How'd you like to take a look at the Pyramids?"

His little boy squirmed out of his arms and ran off towards the bow, older brother in pursuit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ptolemy leaned back into the recesses of his second-best throne and pretended to be asleep. The royal tent was pitched just back from the beach at Pelusium, a long way from the diversions of the palace and the race track. The squabbling of his advisors as they argued with each other reminded him of the annoying flies that infested this infernal beach. The war, the army and its lines of supply, Cleopatra's spies - he couldn't care less about any of it. He swung his legs (they didn't quite reach the floor) and thought about his chariot back in Memphis. The other men in the room droned on.

"Pharoah -" Pothinus insisted in his falsetto voice, "- we really must press you for a decision. The longer we leave the army concentrated here, the more losses we will incur from your sister's hit-and-run tactics. We should either divide our forces or make a decisive move against her". Ptolemy showed no sign of answering. The eunuch tapped his foot in annoyance at the petulance of the fourteen year-old Pharoah. He opened his mouth to scold the boy but was saved by the arrival of a messenger.

Ptolemy looked up in the hope that something interesting had happened that would get him back to his palace and his friends. The messenger handed a scroll to Pothinus who scanned it in silence for a few seconds. It was Ptolemy who now grew impatient.

“Well, Pothinus? What is it?”

“An - er - an interesting opportunity has presented itself, Pharaoh” Pothinus said, looking slightly nervously around the tent at the other members of court. “It seems that Pompey Magnus is anchored off-shore and asks for an audience.” There was a shocked muttering from the others present.

“Pompey?” the boy king repeated. “The Roman? My father liked him.”

“Indeed Pharaoh,” Pothinus agreed, “They went back a long way... but times aren’t what they were in your father’s reign.”

“Pothinus is right, Pharaoh” a deeper voice interjected. “The news from the Roman merchants harboured in Alexandria is that their civil war is over. Caesar came out on top and kicked the Senate out of Greece ten days ago”. The speaker was an armoured and cloaked general and he stepped closer to the throne. “He can only be here for one thing -”

“Your armies, Pharaoh” Pothinus continued, wresting back control of the conversation. “He’s clearly in need of men and weapons and -”

“Well he can’t have them!” the boy squealed in panic. “I need them here! What about my sister?”

“It’s alright Pharaoh” Pothinus said soothingly. “We have options, don’t worry. We don’t need to simply bend the knee to the first Roman who turns up asking for a handout. Maybe a year ago, but not today. That’s right, isn’t it Achilles?”

The soldier took a moment to think. “Sure. Options. And one of them is definitely helping him. This is Pompey Magnus we’re talking about, he’s not someone we want as an enemy.”

"I can do that?" the boy asked hopefully. "Without losing my country to - to *her*?"

"An alliance with the Roman Senate would only make you stronger, Pharaoh" Achilles advised. Pothinus gave the soldier a pointed look.

"Alas, it may not be that simple. If we help Pompey, we make an enemy of Caesar instead, which is just as bad" the eunuch said, shaking his head.

"Well which one is going to win in the long run?" Ptolemy demanded. The two men looked at each other. Pothinus nodded to Achilles to answer.

"Impossible to say, Pharaoh. In your father's time, I'd have backed Pompey all day long but this Caesar is... well, he's something else. You'll remember the reports of his war in Gaul he sent back to Rome? I read them to you a couple of years ago?"

Ptolemy's mind scrambled for the detail: he recalled a whole tribe's women and children deliberately starved to death; thousands of men with both hands chopped off to send a message to their people; an enemy king paraded through Rome in chains before being publicly strangled. He shivered at the thought.

"We'll hold this Pompey as our prisoner and hand him over to Caesar to show our loyalty" he decided firmly.

"But what if the senate gains the upper hand again, Pharaoh, and Caesar is executed as a rebel?" Pothinus asked gently. "I rather suspect that Pompey won't be too happy at being held as your prisoner then."

"Can't I just send him away, refuse to see him?" the boy pleaded. Achilles shook his head.

"I don't think so, Pharaoh. Caesar would be just as angry if we had Pompey in our power and let him get away. And if it's Pompey who prevails - well, he won't forget the insult."

The boy-king looked around the room for better answers, his eyes falling on his tutor.

"Theodotus - you've read everything - what advice do you have?"

The old man stood up and approached the throne, his eyes gleaming in the gloom of the tent. Pothinus raised his eyebrows meaningfully as Theodotus passed him. The tutor reached the throne and bent down to the boy's level before speaking.

"Matters like this are never straightforward, Pharaoh. You know that from the history we've studied. What would Alexander have done when faced with an impossible task?"

The boy blinked blankly until his tutor continued.

"He'd have cut straight to the heart of the matter, like at Gordium"

Ptolemy's face showed a dim hint of recognition.

"Meaning what, exactly, Theodotus?" The scholar looked back at Pothinus, who nodded his agreement. He leaned in towards Pharaoh and smiled.

"Meaning that a dead man cannot bite you".

\* \* \* \* \*

"I don't like it. Not one bit."

"Don't worry, little one" Pompey cooed, taking Cornelia's shaking hands in his. He glanced towards the beach. "See, they've sent their Commander in Chief to escort me in. That's Achillas seated at the back."

Cornelia narrowed her eyes and examined the approaching boat. "And the others? They don't look like diplomats." The small boat was crewed by four soldiers, by the look of their outfits.

"The pharaoh's camped here with his army," Pompey said with a chuckle in his voice intended to calm his wife's fears. "There isn't a diplomat in a hundred miles of here."

"Excuse me, Magnus?" Pompey turned from Cornelia to where Philip was hovering. He stepped closer to his master who lowered his voice confidentially.

“She has a point. They should have sent the royal barge - that’s a fishing boat. It feels off.

How well do you know Achilles?”

“Barely at all, but enough to know he’s no assassin. What do you suggest my alternative is?”

Cornelia spoke up again, her voice catching. “Turn around. Flee, while we can. Go back to Rome, go anywhere!”

“Too late for that, I fear - Pharaoh’s navy is moored upwind of us, we wouldn’t get far” her husband said calmly. “But be optimistic! Have I ever let you down? Besides, if it’s not enough that this kid relies on the support of our Senate, his father owed his kingdom entirely to me!”

In an undertone intended only for Philip, he added: “We’ve rolled the dice now, we can only watch where they land.”

A clunk from below announced the arrival of the Egyptian boat alongside their ship.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pompey stared hard at the nearing beach and the soldiers swarming over it. In the dunes behind, flags snapped and twitched on the tentpoles of Pharaoh’s army, driven by a wind from inland that pushed and shoved their boat back. Not a word had been exchanged since the formal greeting from Achilles as Pompey had stepped aboard with Philip and taken his seat on a wooden bench. He saw that some kind of welcome party was gathering on the shore.

“How goes Pharaoh’s war against the rebels?” he asked the soldier sat opposite, but the man said nothing in return.

“No Greek, eh? What about you?” Pompey tried, turning his attention to the next man, but getting the same response. His eye lingered on the man, struck by his familiar face. “But I know you, don’t I?”

The man couldn’t avoid meeting Pompey’s eye.

“Septimius isn’t it? That’s right, Septimius - you were one of my centurions in the 9th.

Pharaoh pays better than the legions I hope?”

The soldier nodded curtly and looked away. Philip interceded, pushing his folding tablet into Pompey’s hands.

“Here, Magnus - I made some notes of remarks you might want to make to Pharaoh when you meet.” Pompey smiled in thanks and pretended to read them.

A minute passed before the boat ground noisily on the gravelly sand of the shore.

“This is it, Magnus” Philip said, offering his hand to help the old man stand. Fifty yards up the beach, the boy king sat in a covered litter, surrounded by guards, watching.

“Yes, Philip - I think it might be” Pompey replied, hauling himself up with a grunt and stepping into the surf.

Achillas, a pace ahead, about-faced and spoke softly.

“Please forgive me, Magnus”.

Pompey’s eyes widened as Septimius gripped his shoulder from behind and thrust his sword into his back. Achillas stepped forwards and slid his own blade beneath the great man’s rib cage.

From far behind them, fighting it’s way past the onshore wind, came the sound of Cornelia’s scream.

\* \* \* \* \*

The fire was almost out, but the smoke lingered, stinging Philip’s eyes. The wind had brought rain in a thin mizzle that had persisted through the night. Now that the grey dawn had arrived, Philip could see that he had the beach to himself. Pharaoh’s men had ignored

him, leaving with his master's head. He knew had a final duty to perform for him, and that it would take a bigger fire.

He walked a lonely mile in each direction, gathering meagre armfuls of wet branches and rotten boat planks. Returning to the body a second time, Philip saw they were no longer alone and quickened his pace to an anxious trot. As he closed, he realised that the newcomer was an old man.

"Sir?" he enquired politely in Greek, approaching from the blind side. The man turned slowly away from the headless corpse laying on its back in the sand.

"Your master?" he said. Philip nodded and dropped his load of firewood. "Someone needs to make sure he reaches the other side."

He nodded again. Kneeling, Philip stacked the wood and searched for the driest pieces to start building Pompey's pyre. The old man carried on talking.

"Was he someone special then?"

"He was Pompey Magnus" was all the Philip could think to say. He stooped and blew life into the fire.

"Even him, huh?" the visitor observed.

After a few moments of reluctance, flames began to spit and crawl up the damp wood pile.

Philip wiped the grime from his face and looked upwards.

"Will you help me lift him?" he asked. Together they managed to haul the body into the fire.

The ancient purple cloak caught easily and soon its owner was wreathed in smoke, its tendrils slowly climbing into the leaden sky.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Pompey the Great was one of Rome's biggest celebrities, loved by the people and charged for decades with solving its greatest problems. He spent his youth conquering enemies across Europe and Asia and adding their territory to Rome's growing empire, ending Spartacus's slave revolt and sweeping the seas of pirates. When the Republic faced the threat of Caesar's armies, it naturally turned to its national hero, but Pompey had reached the end of his greatness. The story of his small death on the beach at Pelusium is recorded by the ancient historian [Plutarch](#). Caesar was not pleased at this shabby treatment of one of Rome's best, and in time Ptolemy was made to regret it.*

*This story is extracted from the forthcoming collection 'Six Nasty, Brutish and Short Stories from Ancient Rome' by Ed McWatt. Find out more at [www.edmcwatt.com](http://www.edmcwatt.com)*