

The problem with power was that there were limits.

I'd worked for my power. I'd fought for it. I'd struggled and schemed and bled, and in the end I *won*. I crushed my enemies underfoot. I was the most powerful man in the most powerful empire in the world. My people loved me, and my enemies feared me.

By any reasonable measure, I had achieved success. I had risen as high as any man could hope to.

And yet before the pale specter of death, I was as helpless as any plebeian.

The wars in the east had been successful. More successful than my last attempt, certainly, though that had served its own purpose. This time I had carved out a new territory for the empire. I had expanded our borders, devastating the Parthians in the process.

More to the point, I had captured several cities. Cities with libraries.

I was hardly the first man to be frustrated by my own mortality. It was, I thought, a universal feeling. It was a natural response.

In all these years of trying, someone must have found a way to surpass that mortality. I intended to find out what it was.

Some would call what I was attempting hubris. They would say I was going against the will of the gods, and that such things always ended in sorrow.

Those people, I thought, were small-minded. They couldn't attain it themselves, so they consoled themselves with the assertion that it wasn't worth seeking. It wasn't an uncommon response, in my experience. How many philosophers had claimed that the powerful were unhappy, while neatly ignoring the fact that they themselves were miserable in their powerlessness? Diogenes in his jar could claim that decadent society left people confused and unhappy, but at the end of the day I doubted he was any more joyous in his poverty than I was in my riches.

To accept the limitations of one's birth betrays a disappointing lack of ambition.

I had more respect for those who said that immortality should be sought in other ways. These people, I thought, had a more reasonable position. It was true that the works of great men lingered, and some names would be spoken forever. Would anyone forget Caesar, or Alexander, or Plato? Not likely.

But was there any satisfaction in that? I doubted it. They were still dead, after all.

And aside from that, achieving such a status was not an easy task.

I knew my own strengths. Humility was not a sin I had often been accused of. I was a skilled general. I was a skilled politician. I knew how to gain power, how to keep it, and how to exercise it.

Within this narrow field, I was a genius. But my talents were not the sort that would be long remembered after I was gone.

I could have made Rome itself my legacy, as Augustus had. But I was wise enough to know that not even our empire, the greatest the world had ever known, could last forever. The people of the Nile were proof enough of that. In their day they had been the masters of the world, and none had ever surpassed the great monuments they built. But we had beaten them in the end, and left them little more than a memory.

The people who sought immortality through great works were to be admired beyond those who scoffed at the notion entirely. But it was still settling for second place, and I had never been able to tolerate that.

I much preferred the notion of living forever by simply not dying.

The libraries had proved useless, in the end. My scholars combed through them thoroughly, and all agreed on that. There was much mention of eternal life, of those who sought for it, and no consensus of how it might be won. After searching through all the works of the ancients, they had no answers for me.

Some of them dared to tell me that this was a sign. That I should give it up. *Memento mori*, they said. Remember that you are mortal.

I had them reminded of the broad applicability of this fact in a rather permanent fashion, and then arranged for more scholars. Ones with more ambition.

In the meantime, I fought a campaign in Africa, eradicating our rivals there and strengthening the defenses. While I was there, my scholars studied in Egypt, in Alexandria and in the tombs of pharaohs. I had, at considerable expense, arranged for various texts to be imported from the east.

All of them were useless. The alchemists attempted various concoctions, but half of them were poison and the other half did nothing. Not that I was foolish enough to test them on myself, of course. There was no shortage of test subjects for their experiments.

As the wise and learned had proven useless, I next turned my attentions to the barbarians. The shamans of the Germanic tribes, it was said, were given many strange powers by their gods. Perhaps, I thought, one of them had the answer I sought.

And this did prove to be more successful than my previous attempts. It was in Gaul that I met an immortal for the first time.

Despite all my searching, this meeting happened by pure chance. It was his whim, rather than any action on my part, which brought us together. He had heard that the emperor of Rome was in the area, and decided to see for himself.

Some of my guards tried to stop him. They failed, thoroughly. He didn't even kill them. He didn't need to. They ended up chasing him into my presence, although his confidence was such that they seemed more an honor guard than armed pursuers.

He did not abase himself before me, showed none of the respect which was typically paid to me. I couldn't honestly blame him, though. His sheer presence was such that I almost felt that I should kneel to *him* rather than the other way around.

"Good day," he said. His Latin was very smooth, very clean. He could have been mistaken for a senator or legate, from how well-spoken he was.

"And with whom do I speak?" I asked.

"My name is Conn," he said. "Pardon the intrusion, but I had heard that you were staying here, and thought that I would come and greet you. I am a king myself, you see, though I recently abdicated the position. I found it growing tiresome."

"I cannot imagine growing bored with governance," I replied.

"One grows bored with all things in time," he said lightly. "Tell me, oh mighty governor, what brings you to this corner of the world? You are far from Rome."

To this day, I don't know why I told him the truth. But I did, explaining my goals, and what I was looking for in this region of the world. I told him that I had looked for answers in the south and east, and found nothing, and thus I had come to the north and west to see what I could find here.

Conn listened throughout in patience and silence. When I had finished, he simply smiled. "I know what you seek," he said. "You see, I am myself what you would like to be. I am old...older than your city, and then some. So you may rest assured that it can be done. But I won't be sharing my secrets with you. I think that would end badly." His smile broadened. "Well, thank you for satisfying my curiosity. I will be leaving now."

"I could make you stay," I said. "I could make you give me what I want."

"No," he said, with not a trace of fear. "You couldn't. And if you tried, a great many of your men would die. Good day."

He walked out, and I let him, because I believed him. Though he looked like a youth, I believed that he was ancient. And though he was unarmed and unarmored, I believed that he was a match for any of my men.

Afterwards, one of my guards said that this man Conn had sounded like a Briton. So we turned in that direction, thinking to find more of his kind. Preferably one who was not so...singularly impressive as he had been.

We were not successful. Or perhaps we were; how would I know? He had seemed like any other man, but for his commanding presence, and his strength. Perhaps there were dozens of them among the barbarians my legions fought.

In any case, it soon became a moot point. Another man arrived, not long after. I later learned that Conn had sent him to me, and my opinion of him improved when I did.

But at the time, all I knew was that a man had arrived, saying that I would want to speak with him. He knew enough of what I wanted to convince my officers, and eventually he was shown into my presence. He was an easterner, a Hun, or something like one.

Immediately, I knew that he was not Conn's equal. He lacked that man's authority, that *presence* that had so impressed me. Then again, even at the time I knew that few were on his level. The world could not have born many.

"I can give you what you want," he said without introduction. "I can give you freedom from the ravages of time. And I will, if you serve me for a year and never once disobey, no matter how menial the work I give you is."

"I could give you a great many slaves," I said. "They could do more service than I, in that year."

"You could," he agreed. "And if I desired slaves, that would be meaningful. But I don't. What I want is to see the Caesar on his knees, scrubbing floors."

"I could have you put to death for speaking to me like that," I said coldly.

"You could," he agreed again. "But what would that gain you? Kill me, and your own death will still be just around the corner. Serve me, and it need never come."

"I will require proof," I said. "And time to put my affairs in order."

"Quite understandable," he said, smiling.

"Very well, then," I said. "A year is a small price to pay for eternity."

Not long thereafter, I died after a short and sudden illness. It was a simple enough thing to arrange, and it would be accepted by my people more readily than abandonment. There was no betrayal in dying at the whim of the gods, after all.

I left the empire to the rule of my sons, though I knew that neither of them was fit to hold it. Those who left their legacy in the form of their bloodline were blessed with better offspring than I. I had tried to impart the cunning which brought me to power, but neither one grasped it. They could repeat what I said, but they didn't understand why I said it. I was confident that neither would hold power long.

Time proved me right. The one was a trusting fool, the other a raving madman. Both died in ignominy.

I served my year, and never once did I complain. True to his word, he killed me and brought me back, to feast on the lives of others and extend my own.

I murdered him afterwards, of course. I don't share power gladly or willingly, as he would have known if he had any sense at all. But for all his age and all his power, he was still a great fool. I ended him easily.

The nature of power was much the same among my new peers as it had always been, and it wasn't long before I was navigating the new systems as easily as I had the old. I set the established powers against one another, subtly, carefully, until at last they had been weakened to the point that I could seize power myself.

I returned to the continent of my birth at that point, making it the center of my empire. I lacked the total dominance over my peers that I had once enjoyed, but I had enough prominence to satisfy me. I had found immortality; I was hardly going to lose it battling even older vampires than myself for the sake of pride.

The city I had been born in was abandoned by that point, but Alexandria still stood. Though its libraries had failed me when I was there as a mortal, I still felt some fondness for the city. If nothing else it still existed, which relatively few things from so long ago did. I established the center of my power in Alexander's city, where it has remained ever since, through all the many challenges I have weathered.