Commodus – Son of Marcus Aurelius, Heir to Emperor

This is not an actual letter. This is a summation of plausible, and historically based advice based on options facing Marcus Aurelius in 172 and later, Commodus.

Background: You are the sole surviving male child of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina (out of 14 children). You have been with with your father in the northern border conflicts.

Dear Father,

I am writing because I know you are struggling to reason through the best course of action to protect our beloved Empire. Our legions have fought bravely and driven the uncivilized barbarians back across the Danube River. Our soldiers suffered and died from plague and at the hands of barbaric invaders. It is essential we honor the deaths and valor of our Roman soldiers by holding our line. We must defend the Roman Empire’s boundaries at all costs or we will appear weak to the northern tribes and they will merely attempt to infiltrate our lands again.

However, we cannot stay here forever. The Roman Empire is vast and our legions are stretched thin. Huge legionary presence along this border is unsustainable. The soldiers here are ill and restless, but we also have many other “fronts” to defend around our Empire. The long-term solution must be to build strong defenses along this border in order to show the barbarians the strength of Rome and deter future attacks. It will also protect this valuable farmland we desperately need to feed our loyal subjects.

I also feel we should make a peace negotiation with the northern tribesmen that would make them less likely to continue their incursions into our lands. With your intelligence and reason, you can find a solution that could lead to lasting peace.

The Emperor of Rome must not remain permanently at the battlefront. There are rumblings of rivals becoming popular in the East. The people of Rome and the Senators need to see you and know of your great victory against the Marcomanni. I recommend you return to Rome and host celebratory games and contests declaring victory and showing the power and strength of Rome.

We have invested great amounts of money and lives in defending our reputation as the most powerful empire in the world so we do not want to abandon our successful defense of these northern borders. However, we have more than enough land to defend and need to seek a long-term solution for defense and peace with these northern barbarians.

Your loyal son,

Commodus

Guiding Questions:

1. Why is this land valuable to Rome?
2. What kind of stable defenses could be created?
3. What could Aurelius negotiate to create a lasting peace with the northern tribesmen?
4. What could be a few positive consequences of holding this border?
5. What could be a few negative consequences of holding this border?