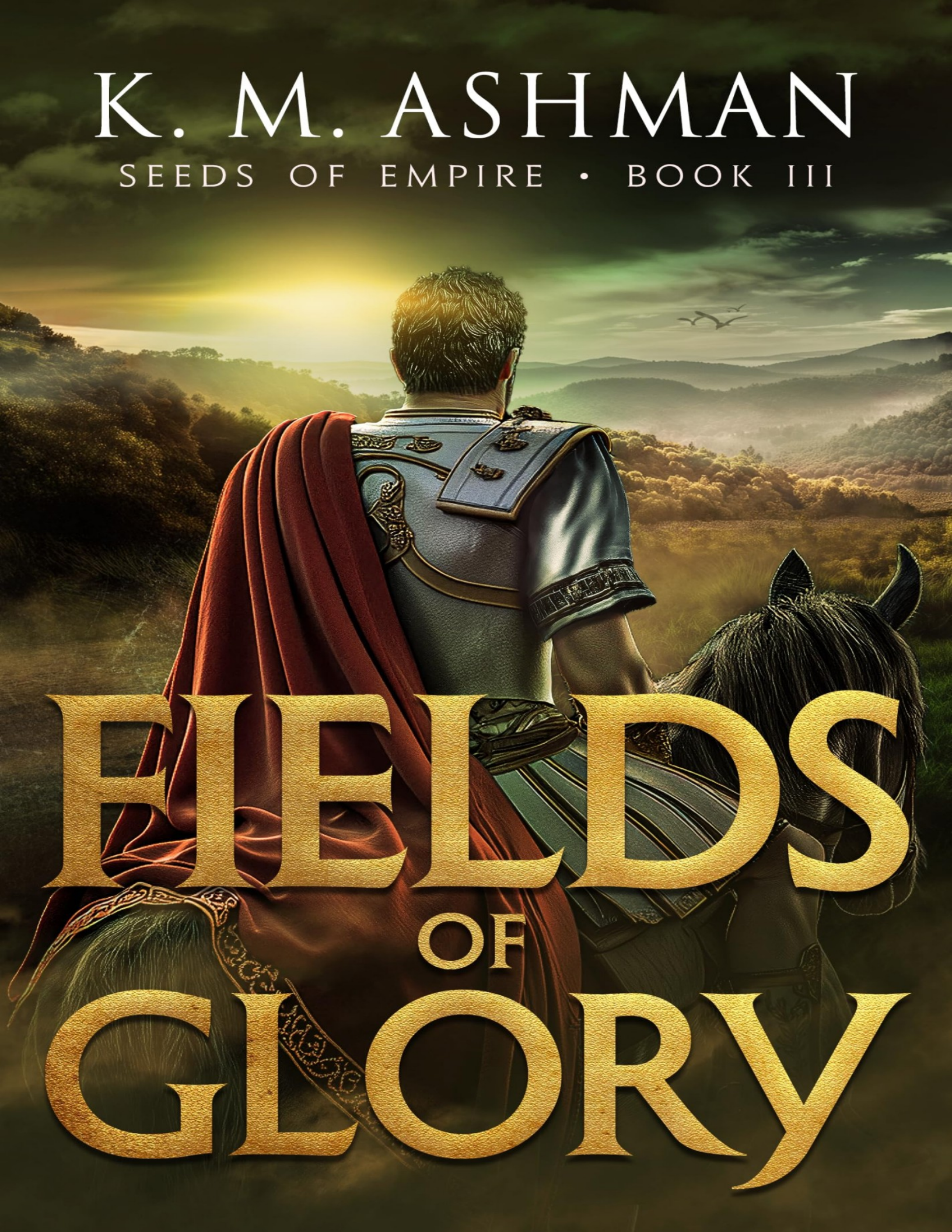




K. M. ASHMAN

SEEDS OF EMPIRE • BOOK III

FIELDS
OF
GLORY

SEEDS OF EMPIRE

Book III

Fields of Glory

by

K. M. Ashman

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CHARACTER NAMES

Main Characters in Gaul

Gaius Julius Caesar — Proconsul of Gaul

Fabius — Legate

Brutus — Legate

Quintus Cicero — Legate

Marcus — Prefect and childhood friend

Felix — Former slave

Sabinus — Legate

Gallic and German Opponents

Ariovistus — Germanic king

Ambiorix — Leader of the Eburones

Vercingetorix — Leader of the Arverni

Rome

Aurelia — Caesar's mother

Julia — Caesar's daughter

Lucius — Aurelia's household slave

Regulus — Senator

Fadius — Senator

Cato — Senator

Pompey — Senator

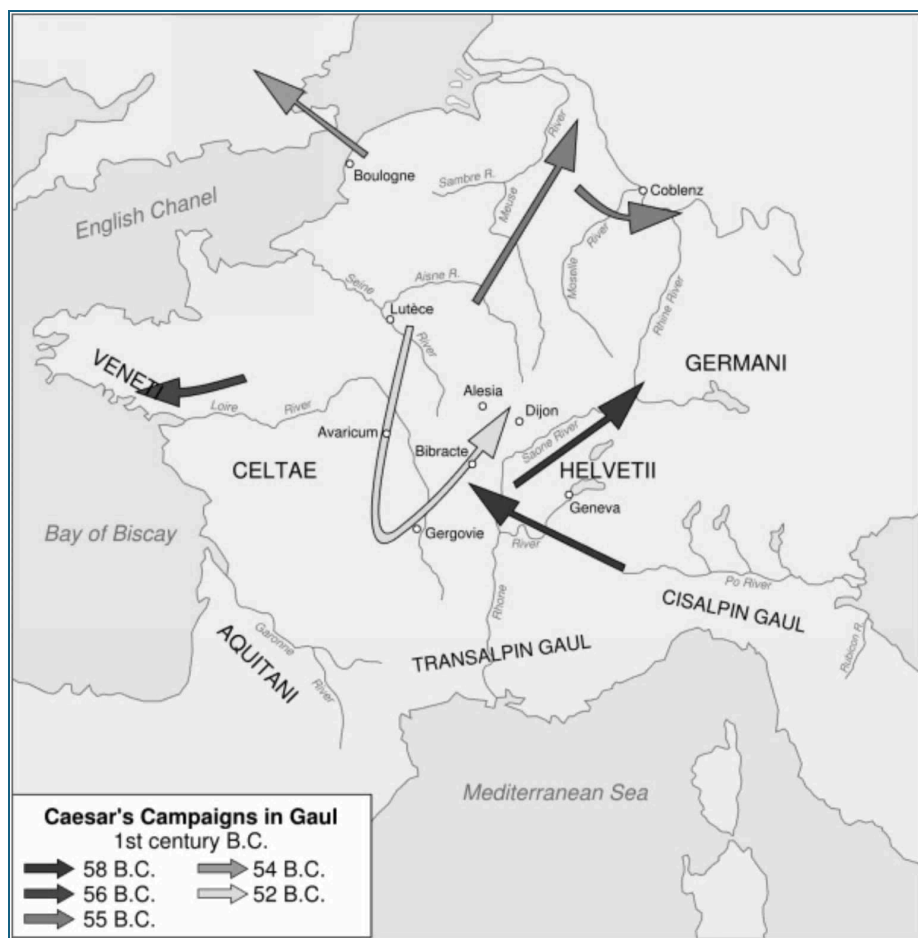
Crassus — Senator

Bibulus — Senator

MAP

Caesar's Gallic Campaigns

58 B.C.— 52 B.C.



Credit Wikipedia

PROLOGUE

Gaul – Late Winter, 58 BCE

The wind cut like a blade as it came off the snow-tipped peaks to the east, carrying with it the scent of pine and the faint tang of woodsmoke from the countless fires below. Orgetorix stood upon the crest of a long, bare ridge, the muscles in his arms and shoulders shifting beneath the weight of a fur-lined cloak. It was wolfskin, heavy and black, clasped at the throat with a broad disc of beaten bronze that caught the light of the lowering sun. The cloak moved about him as the wind changed, but Orgetorix did not flinch.

Before him, the valley lay like a great green ocean of forest and field, the dark ranks of the Gallic oaks stretching away until they merged with the horizon. Here and there the trees broke apart to reveal clearings dotted with cattle, rough timber huts, and the narrow lines of tracks carved by centuries of feet and hooves. It was a land alive and fertile, but for his people, it had become a prison.

He shifted his stance, the ground beneath his boots hard with frost, and rested his left hand on the hilt of the dagger at his belt. It was not of Helvetian make, the blade was Roman, a pugio, its grip wrapped in worn leather, its guard scratched and dented from use. He had taken it from a Roman centurion years before, in a fight that had left the man dead at his feet. The weight of it now was more than metal. It was a reminder of an enemy that would never willingly see the Helvetii free to walk their own path.

Behind him, the sound of movement rose like the rumble of a distant storm. He turned his head slightly, and the sight was enough to draw the breath from even the most battle-hardened heart.

They filled the valley floor and spilled up the slopes beyond: wagons drawn by oxen, heavy with the goods of a people on the move; herds of cattle and sheep, their breath steaming in the cold air; warriors in mail and leather, spears in hand, shields slung across their backs; women guiding children along the churned earth of the track, some carrying infants wrapped tight against their bodies, others leading carts piled high with baskets of grain, tools, and the carved wooden images of household gods.

The Helvetii had gathered their entire nation here and the valleys beyond. Not a clan, not a warband, but all of them. Old men with faces like carved oak, boys not yet grown, and mothers with eyes as hard as any soldier's.

Orgetorix knew the number well enough from the council: nearly four hundred thousand souls. In truth, the exact figure mattered little. What mattered was that they were leaving, every man, woman, and child, abandoning the land that had fed them for generations.

He had argued for this course for years. The valleys and meadows of their homeland were rich but narrow, hemmed in by mountains and by neighbours who envied their strength. The harvests were never enough for all, and their enemies watched from across borders and smiled when hunger struck. That winter had been the worst in living memory and whole villages had emptied themselves into the snow to beg at the storehouses of others.

They could not live this way any longer. They would not.

He had chosen the route with care. West, into the lands of the Sequani and the Aedui, and beyond them to the great ocean where the land was said to stretch wide and empty. There they could settle and grow strong, but he knew what stood in the way. Rome.

The Province lay like a barrier to the south, its garrison towns and fortresses manned by disciplined legions. The Romans claimed peace and order, but their peace was the silence of a clenched fist, their order the weight of a boot upon the neck. They would not watch idly while the Helvetii crossed their borders.

Orgetorix's fingers tightened on the pugio hilt. He remembered the face of the man he had killed for it, the shock in his eyes when he realised that the Helvetii were not the barbarians Rome believed them to be, but fighters who could match them steel for steel. The Romans thought their discipline would break any foe, but Orgetorix would show them that a people fighting for survival did not break.

A crunch of footsteps brought him from his thoughts. His second-in-command, Caturix, came up the slope, his broad shoulders hunched against the wind. His hair was bound in a warrior's knot, and the scars on his arms and neck marked him as a man who had seen many campaigns.

'They are ready,' Caturix said simply, his eyes following Orgetorix's gaze toward the endless tide of people and wagons below.

Orgetorix nodded.

'The scouts?'

'They have seen no Roman patrols. Not yet. But traders speak of a Roman general in the south, a man called Caesar.'

The name meant little to Orgetorix. Rome's generals came and went. Some were brave, some were fools, but all of them were servants of the same arrogant power.

'Our paths will cross soon enough,' said Orgetorix. 'And perhaps he will find we are not the easy prey he thinks.'

The wind rose, carrying the sharp tang of pine resin and the heavier smell of the herds below. Orgetorix looked once more at the valley, at the restless mass of his people. He saw fear in some faces, excitement in others, but in all he saw the same thing: determination.

He took a slow breath, letting the cold fill his lungs, and felt the weight of his people's trust settle across his shoulders like another cloak. The decision had been made. There was no turning back.

He turned to Caturix.

'Sound the horn.'

Caturix hesitated only long enough to study his leader's face, then gave a short nod and strode back down the slope. Moments later, the deep,

rolling call of a war horn rose from the valley floor, its note carrying over the forest like the voice of the gods themselves.

The sound was answered by another, and another, until the air trembled with the chorus of bronze and bone. Oxen bellowed, warriors beat spear shafts against their shields, and the tide of humanity began to move.

From the crest of the ridge, Orgetorix watched as the first wagons creaked forward, their wheels sinking into the thawing earth. Columns of warriors formed along the flanks, eyes scanning the tree line for any sign of danger. The great migration had begun.

Somewhere in the south, in a city of stone and marble, Rome would hear of this movement. Men in clean clothes, fattened by good food and red wine would argue, and then decide how the world should be, and Rome would come.

Orgetorix smiled without mirth and rested his hand on the Roman dagger.

It was the way of things, and it gave him no fear... Let them come.

CHAPTER ONE

Rome

The morning carried a clean brightness, the kind Rome sometimes granted after nights of rain. The marble steps of the Curia Hostilia shone as if re-polished by the storm, and men in new-dried togas climbed them with the cautious vigour of soldiers scaling a breach. The Forum was already a tide of movement, clients clustering, traders shouting beneath awnings, and lictors clearing paths with the tap of rods against stone.

Marcus Atilius Regulus stood a moment on the steps to take in the noise, the smell of wet dust and olive oil, the glint of gold on temple friezes. Twenty-seven, patrician by birth, clever by habit, he had been elected to the Senate in the last enrolment and still felt the old thrill when the doors opened and the cool breath of that chamber washed over him. He adjusted the fold of his toga and passed between the lictors into the Curia.

Inside, the space hummed like a hive on the edge of swarming. The benches were already filling beneath the painted ceiling. Pompeius, seated halfway down on the right with his veterans of glory orbiting close; Crassus, farther left, surrounded by men with ledger faces; Cato near the front, rigid as a spear planted in dry ground; and on one of the lower benches, Cicero, thin and watchful, head bent slightly as though listening for thunder.

The day's order of business had been nailed to the bronze tablet at dawn: A bill to resolve irregularities and confirm the agrarian settlements made during the consulship of Gaius Julius Caesar, with provision for distribution to Pompey's veterans and compensation to landholders. Everyone understood the true title: A reckoning for power.

Regulus's mentor, Quintus Lutatius Sabinus—grey-templed, dry as parchment, and sound in procedure—lifted two fingers as Regulus

approached.

‘Sit here,’ Sabinus murmured, making room. ‘Young knees climb faster than old ones, but old eyes see where the steps end.’

Regulus lowered himself beside him and scanned the chamber again. Bibulus was present, sallow and tight-lipped, like a man asked to sniff milk he knew had soured. The consuls for the year sat on their curule chairs, ready to preside if the debate burned too hot and behind the rostra, scribes tested styluses on wax. A few latecomers slipped in with wet sandals and the looks of men who had already chosen sides.

The crier called for silence and the murmur ebbed. The senior consul rose, performed the brief rites, then announced,

‘Let the advocates be heard.’

Cato was up before anyone else had drawn a breath, the white of his toga severe as a shroud.

‘Fathers,’ he began, ‘Rome is not a bazaar where offices are traded like pepper and grain. She is a thing of law. We are asked today, no, pressed, to approve irregularities, wink at violations, and set our seal on Roman custom handled like a tavern girl. Gaius Julius Caesar, during his consulship, forced through distributions by mob and intimidation, threatened colleagues, threatened us, and now... *now*.. we are told to smooth the ledger because his friends need their silver, and his allies need their applause.’

A rumble of approval rose from the benches behind him. Cato’s gaze was flint as he continued..

‘Should the veterans of Pompeius be housed? Perhaps. Should farmers who lost their leases receive compensation? Certainly. But not like this, not at the price of stamping our Senate’s crest upon a year of law broken by spectacle. Confirm these acts, and what do we confirm? That a consul may govern by clamour and later come here expecting us to launder his stains. Will we teach our sons that methods do not matter? That a man may strike the law in the face so long as he smiles when he asks our blessing afterward?’

He gestured toward the doors, toward the Forum beyond.

‘Outside, men cheer the names of the moment. In here, we guard Rome itself. If we allow the people’s wish to be whipped to frenzy whenever a clever demagogue requires it, then we are no longer a Senate, merely the chorus to another man’s play.’

He sat, and the sound gathered again. Regulus felt the old tug of admiration. Cato’s words were not cunning; they were a blade, hammered true.

Crassus rose next, heavy, composed, every word weighed like coin.

‘Fathers,’ he said, ‘I have learned two things in my life: how to count, and when to stop pretending numbers are theology. The distributions we debate did not spring from air. They were drafted, amended, recorded, executed with witnesses, and in doing so they fed Rome, calmed the streets, and settled men who had risked their bodies in our service.’

He lifted a palm, forestalling a heckle.

‘You will say the process offended custom. Perhaps. But shall we punish results because the rites left soot on the marble? You cannot feed hungry veterans with Cato’s virtue. You cannot pay landholders with words that smell of incense. The accounts stand as they are. The city has eaten, and good men sleep with roofs above their head. I say this: confirm what is already done, regularize the process for the future, compensate those owed by law, and cease pretending we can roll back a river with dirty hands.’

As he sat, a different kind of murmur rippled around the benches. A more thoughtful, less raucous response.

Pompey stood next and even Cato’s eyes sharpened. Pompey had worn glory like a cloak so long that even his silences drew men upright.

‘I did not come here to plead,’ he said simply. ‘I came to remember. For twenty years Rome asked me to do things that were not easy. With the help of gods and soldiers braver than the stories say, we did them. Those soldiers were promised land, but many are still waiting. Some are old now, many are dead.’ His voice roughened. ‘Do I love every method by which this business has been advanced? No. Do I love the thought of veterans dying while we compose pure sentences? I do not. I have stood within these walls

while men outside cried for a decision. You know the sound. And it is not the sound of philosophy, it is the sound of Rome asking whether we mean what we say when we bind men to our eagles.’ He turned his head slightly, as if speaking to the past. ‘Confirm the settlements and pay the owners what is owed. If you wish to lash Caesar for how he forced the door, then by all means lash him, but not across the backs of men who followed me and kept your children asleep safe in their beds.’

He sat and for an instant, the Curia felt small, but before the consul could call another, Cicero rose, without that explosive spring he sometimes used when demolishing fools, this was the step of a surgeon toward a table that mattered.

‘If the house will indulge a former consul,’ he said, ‘I would like to speak not to the loudest words, but to the quietest things.’

Soft laughter, quickly gone.

‘It is unwise to sandpaper history,’ he continued, ‘and the year of Caesar’s consulship was not a model of courtesy as Gaius Bibulus can attest. I often stood here, myself, and argued against measures I thought rash. I was shouted down at times and I have not forgotten.’ He let the memory hang, a hook baited with his own bitterness. ‘And yet,’ he went on, ‘I learned something in the courts that I propose we consider. Men bring us cases tangled like fishing line and if you cannot unknot every thread, but can free the hook from the flesh, then you count the work a success.’

A few heads tilted at the analogy.

‘We have three hooks,’ he explained. ‘First, the veterans. They are owed, not by Caesar the man, but by Rome and we should confirm their grants. Second, the landholders whose loss was real. Pay them to the last sesterce, yes, Crassus, to the last sesterce and let the treasury blame those who overstepped, not those who were overrun. Third, and this is the meat of the matter, what of precedent? Do we crown a bad method with a laurel or do we codify against it. I say we pass the pre-mentioned laws but attach to this confirmation one that forbids in future the very tactics we found so distasteful: guards at the voting pens, intimidation of magistrates, and the

drowning of voices with hired noise. We declare the mistakes have been acknowledged, necessity met, and a more honourable procedure preserved for those who come behind us.'

He spread his hands, empty.

'I do not offer you victory, Fathers. I offer you a city that can walk tomorrow without stepping in yesterday's blood. That is sometimes the only triumph granted to men like us, whose battles are fought with words instead of spears.'

He sat, and his time the hum was more thoughtful.

Regulus felt Sabinus's gaze on him.

'Well?' the older man asked, barely moving his lips.

Regulus swallowed. He had come expecting to attack, and he still meant to. But the ground had shifted.

The consul looked to the lower benches.

'Does any other wish to speak?'

Regulus rose, heart thudding as it always did at the instant a voice becomes a public thing. He felt the weight of eyes, the curve of benches like an amphitheatre. He bowed toward the chairs, then faced the chamber.

'Fathers, I am new here. It is possible I misread old tracks. But I grew up in a house where my father kept the Twelve Tables in the atrium, not as decoration, but as a promise.' He let that hang a beat. 'I have heard reason spoken—by Crassus, by Pompeius, by Cicero. I do not deny the debt to the soldiers. I do not deny the pain of landholders. I deny—' he pointed gently toward the door, to where the noise of the Forum pressed— 'that Rome must be governed by the loudest corner of her streets.'

A nod from Cato; Regulus pushed on.

'I was not here in Caesar's year. But I watched. I saw magistrates hustled from rostra, saw votes taken amid fists, saw consular dignity tossed to the mob for sport. If we give today our sanction to what was done by those means, will any future consul pause before employing them? Cicero offers a clever bridge: confirm but chain the future and I respect that. But chains can

be slipped and perhaps we are being persuaded to rub filth in and call it remedy.'

He felt heat rise in his cheeks, but he did not fight it.

'So I propose a different course. Separate the question. Let us pass, today, a decree to pay landholders—fully, swiftly. Let us, today, pass a decree to settle the veterans of Pompeius—fully, swiftly, with lands not tainted by previous irregularities. And let us, today, refuse to stamp our seal upon the manner in which those acts were first forced through. Let the people learn: the Senate can be generous and still despise extortion.'

He heard rustles—interest, scepticism. He finished cleanly.

'Give mercy to the worthy and give nothing to the method. That is the Rome I was taught to serve.'

He sat down, breath tight, hands quiet on his knees as Sabinus's mouth twitched with approval?

Cato rose again, briefly, to strike the iron while it warmed.

'The young man speaks with a clarity that honours his house,' he said, and you could hear the benches of the old party shift in agreement. 'Let us divide the question. Let us wipe tears without washing dirt into the eyes.'

Pompey shook his head slightly, as if at a persistent ache. 'I care little for how you frame it,' he said. 'I care whether my men plow before winter. Just give them land that will not be stolen again by lawyers' distinctions.'

The consul signalled for order and the voices quieted.

'We have heard the principal advocates. If there is no objection, we will allow a last word from Marcus Tullius Cicero.'

Cicero stood, as if he had expected the invitation all along. He did not repeat himself; he sharpened.

'I have argued bridges,' he said. 'The young senator has argued walls. Bridges let traffic pass; walls divide. I ask you merely that if we build this wall today, what do we trap on our side? Months of lawsuits, fields left fallow while litigants fatten and veterans dying with title deeds in their belt and no soil under their nails.'

He turned, letting his eyes touch Cato's, then Regulus's.

‘You know I am no friend of strongmen, I have fought them in court and out. But I am a greater enemy to disorder in a toga. If we can bleed the poison and save the limb, let us not choose amputation because we dislike the surgeon.’

He sat. The consul nodded to the herald. ‘We will call the tribes.’

The ushers opened the doors to the lower hall. Outside, the Forum thickened as word of the vote drew the people. Within the Curia, the process unfolded with its antique grace as the names were called, and the senators filed by to cast their tesserae. Regulus felt the small weight of the tablet in his palm, felt the momentary sickness of choosing in public what one half of the city would despise. He dropped his vote, stepped aside, and watched as the rest of the senators did the same.

Once done, the scribes counted the results, and the consul rose with the tallies in hand.

‘By a narrow margin,’ he announced, ‘the house rejects division and adopts the measure to confirm the acts, with the attached provisions for compensation and the codification of future procedure.’

The feeling of relief was palpable and as many of the opponents of the bill celebrated, Cato’s mouth became a thinner line, and after speaking briefly to those around him, he turned and walked out, the fabric of his toga whispering like a drawn string. Bibulus shook his head in anger, then followed.

Regulus remained seated. He had lost his first major stand. Sabinus’s hand found his arm with a squeeze.

‘Yours was the right speech for your place in the world,’ the older man said softly. ‘Remember, that matters.’

The chamber began to empty into the brightness of the portico. Voices overlapped, clients called to patrons, and messengers darted between the throng. Regulus rose and found himself face to face with Cicero, who had paused as though he had waited for him.

‘You spoke well,’ Cicero said, frankly. ‘And cleanly.’

‘I lost,’ Regulus answered, perhaps too quickly.

Cicero's eyes smiled though his mouth did not.

'There are many kinds of victories, Regulus. 'Today, you fixed a shape in men's minds: generosity without surrender. We will need that idea sooner than you think.'

He glanced toward the Forum, where, beyond the rim of the portico, he could see the swell of a crowd shouting a single name over and over again.

'Do you know what I envy in Caesar?' Cicero asked, almost conversationally. 'Not his appetite for power, but his appetite for consequence. He acts as if every hour is a rung to achievement while we act as if hours only need managing.' He shrugged, 'Take care your hatred of the man does not blind you to the greatness of his achievements. He is not all one colour.'

Regulus bristled reflexively.

'I do not hate him,' he said.

'No,' Cicero returned, 'but you will be asked to. Be suspicious of requests that ask your hatred to do the work your judgment should.'

He left with a nod and Regulus stepped into the pale sun at the top of the steps. Across the square, near the Basilica Julia, the chant rose, ragged but fervent: '*Caesar! Caesar!*' He felt, for the first time, not contempt, not fear, but a question opening inside him like a small door in a wall he'd thought solid.

'You look as if someone has swapped your wine cup,' said Sabinus coming to his shoulder.

'Cicero suggested I beware of hating men by the bundle,' Regulus said.

'Ah,' Sabinus replied.

'He would. He sells cautions in amphorae and courage in cups.'

They stood a moment together, looking down into Rome. Someone below laughed too loudly; a stallholder swore at a thief with inventive eloquence and a boy ran with a message between pillars, sandaled feet slapping stone.

'Come,' Sabinus said at last. 'There will be new bills to read by afternoon, and old enemies to greet like cousins at a funeral. We have work

to do, even when we lose.'

CHAPTER TWO

Gaul

The road north from Vienna was little more than a raised strip of packed earth in places. The winter rains still pooled in its hollows. Beyond the verge, fields lay freshly turned for planting, their dark soil steaming faintly in the chill of the morning.

Three weeks on the march had ground the legions into a steady, mechanical rhythm. Armour no longer rattled, packs no longer shifted awkwardly on shoulders and the lines of men flowed across the landscape like the coils of a single purposeful beast.

Felix rode at the rear of the staff party, close enough to watch Caesar without intruding. The general's eyes were fixed on the road ahead, his posture loose but alert as messengers came and went without pause. A nod, a short exchange, a gesture, and they were away again, spurring to the column's flanks.

Felix had noticed something in these few weeks. Caesar rarely raised his voice. Orders spread with speed and precision, yet every man in the column from the vanguard to the last man in the last cohort obeyed them without hesitation. Authority, Felix was learning, did not need to be loud.

The column had crossed the Isère three days before, its fast green water swollen with snowmelt. Now the Rhône lay ahead, marking the edge of the Province and the threshold into independent Gaul. Scouts had reported no sight of the Helvetii yet, but traders and Aeduan riders told the same story. They had gathered their entire people and were moving west.

Felix had heard many numbers. Two hundred thousand. Three hundred thousand. More. In every telling the image was the same: a tide of

wagons, oxen, warriors, and families stretching for miles, eating the land bare as they passed.

It was Tribune Carrinas who broke the morning silence.

‘It will be like chasing the shadow of a mountain,’ he said, reining in alongside Felix.

Felix only nodded. There was little else to say.

The air was sharp with the smell of pine and melting snow. Somewhere up ahead the engineers had gone ahead to inspect the bridge at Geneva. The road dipped into a shallow valley where a cluster of wagons waited by the verge. A merchant with a silver arm-ring called out as they passed.

‘From the Aedui,’ he said. ‘The Helvetii burn their lands. Every village, every grain store, gone. They march with nothing but what they carry.’

Felix glanced at Caesar. The general’s expression did not change, but there was the faintest lift of his chin.

By midday the army reached a low ridge and below them, the Rhône glittered silver under a pale sky. On the far bank, dark pine forest rose to meet the hills and somewhere beyond those lay the Helvetii’s intended path.

Caesar drew up his horse and the mounted officers gathered instinctively, Labienus, Carrinas, Petreius, Balbus, each waiting for the word.

‘We camp here tonight,’ said Caesar, his voice carrying just enough to reach the nearest ranks. ‘Petreius, send riders to Geneva. The bridge is to be destroyed before the Helvetii are within sight of it.’

‘Yes, Dominus,’ said Petreius and wheeled away without question.

‘Carrinas, send word to Dumnorix of the Aedui,’ continued Caesar, ‘he is to confirm the Helvetii vanguard’s position and report daily.’

Carrinas hesitated a heartbeat before saluting and turning away. Everyone knew Dumnorix’s loyalty was uncertain, but his influence among the tribes was too valuable to ignore.

Labienus remained by Caesar’s side.

‘You mean to force them through Aeduan territory?’

‘I mean to decide where the war will be fought,’ Caesar said quietly.
‘And on whose terms.’

The engineers worked through the afternoon, marking out the camp’s lines. Ditches were cut, stakes driven, and ramparts raised. It was a pattern every man knew, yet they worked with the urgency of those who knew their safety depended on it.

By sunset, fires burned in long lines down the slope and Felix sat with two centurions, sharing bread and watered wine. From the rampart the river was a black ribbon under the rising moon and somewhere beyond it, the Helvetii moved steadily closer.

‘Tomorrow we move north-west after the bridge is down,’ said one of the centurions. ‘Caesar wants to keep the Helvetii from the Province at all costs.’

The second centurion frowned.

‘That will drive them into our allies’ lands.’

‘Better there than here,’ said the first, throwing Felix a chunk of bread. ‘He knows what he is doing.’

Later, as the watch changed, Felix saw Caesar walking the ramparts with Labienus, speaking in low tones. He could not hear the words, but the rhythm of the exchange was calm, deliberate, and certain. It all seemed far too calm but there was no doubt in Felix’s mind that by noon the following day, the bridge at Geneva would be gone. The Helvetii would have no easy road into the Province, only the one Caesar had chosen for them.

The following morning, Felix rode with the detachment sent to oversee the demolition. The bridge stood broad and strong over the Rhône, its timber supports driven deep into the riverbed, the surface worn smooth by years of traffic. The water below ran swift and hard, dragging at the pilings with a force that made the timbers groan.

Centurion Varro of the engineers was already at work, his men swarming over the structure, stripping planks, and hacking at the