

The Boar and the Eagle

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For Bram, my brother by birth and in spirit.

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I

The Journey

Rome, eight days after the Ides of Martius, in the consulship of Piso and Gabinius (23 March, 58 BC)

Publius Licinius Crassus awoke from his sleep some time before dawn. He lay in his bed for a few drowsy moments, staring at the ceiling and blinking heavily, when he heard a familiar voice.

"Domine," it said. It was the voice of Latychus, the steward, chief among the house slaves. Crassus turned his head to see the door of his bedroom ajar, the head of his steward poking through, illuminated from outside by the oil lamp he was holding in his hand. Crassus realised the steward had been the reason he had woken up in the first place. It puzzled him somewhat, since he never needed to be awoken.

He sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Have I overslept?"

"No, domine," said Latychus, his head slightly bowed, and his eyes on the floor. "You have a visitor."

Crassus looked through the slit in the wall. It was pitch black outside.

"Which hour is it?" he yawned.

"The tenth, domine." Latychus looked rather sleepy himself.

The tenth hour! It was more night than morning still.

"Who comes calling at this hour?" Crassus asked, genuinely surprised rather than annoyed. He was an early riser and did not overly cherish his sleep.

"A boy sent by Gaius Julius Caesar, domine."

Suddenly Crassus was wide awake and threw off his blanket. "Finally, it's about time!"

He was soon in his clothes, striding briskly down the corridor to meet the visitor. It was cold still, closer to winter than spring, and a chilling draught crept through the halls. Crassus caught the door-boy and Caesar's runner at the door, exchanging small talk, one slave to another. When Crassus approached, the door-boy suddenly straightened, bowed his head and stepped backwards respectfully. A very handsome and fastidiously groomed Greek slave stood in the

door opening. Behind him in the shadows of the night outside there was a shadowy group of men, some of them bearing torches. The open door blew in the morning chill.

“Domine. Hermion, servant of proconsul Gaius Julius Caesar, wishes to deliver a message!” the door-boy said in a proclamatory voice.

“Speak, Hermion,” Crassus said, his own voice still a little husky.

Hermion also straightened and droned up the message he was sent to deliver, with a thick Greek accent, “His honour, the proconsul Gaius Julius Caesar, requests your presence. He instructs you to bring a fast horse and take food with you. Please bring one servant and only the necessary belongings. You can send for your other servants and belongings later.”

“When does the proconsul require my presence?” Crassus asked.

“Now, if you please,” Hermion replied. “The proconsul instructed me to tell you to move with great haste and meet him at the Milvian Bridge.”

“Where are we going?” Crassus asked.

“I am not at liberty to say,” Hermion replied, bowing his head.

“Alright then,” Crassus said. “Tell your master I will be there shortly.”

Hermion bowed and left, the other men trailing behind him. When Crassus turned around, he saw his father standing in the hallway. Publius Crassus was yet unmarried and too young for the kind of public office which required him to have his own house, and so he still lived in his parents’ house, according to his family’s custom. His father did not look sleepy at all, and Crassus would not have been surprised if his father had already been awake before Caesar’s messenger had come calling. Marcus Licinius Crassus was always awake so early that his son Publius sometimes wondered if his father slept at all.

“Good morning, son,” father said.

Publius Crassus bowed his head respectfully. “Father, the time has finally come. Caesar has asked me to...”

“I know, Publius,” his father replied gently. “I have already instructed the servants to prepare everything. Gather your belongings. Your horse will be ready for you outside. I shall awake your mother.”

Crassus packed a linen bag with the scant belongings he truly valued; a few family jewels, the dice his brother had given him when he had become a man, a small leather ball he used for games, his dagger... He eyed the heavy oakwood chest in the corner of his room as he chewed on his lip. Caesar’s messenger had said he could send for his other things later, so he’d have to write home with a list of things as soon as he got round to it. On his desk was a small pearwood box with a padlock. He unlocked it with a key that hung from a string around his neck and took out a jingling pouch. It contained the spending money he had kept aside for when this day would come—fifty denarii. It was a lot of money, considering he would be fed and sheltered free of charge for some time to come, but on the other hand he came from one of the richest families in Rome, to whom fifty denarii was an amount to sneeze at. He put the money pouch in the bag, after which his body slave, Apollonius, helped him fasten his leather cuirass in front of the mirror. Then he sheathed his sword on his belt, while Apollonius lay his cloak over his shoulders and fastened it with a brooch. Crassus looked in the mirror and smiled a little at how soldierly he looked. He had told the barber servant to keep his hair a lot shorter than he usually wore it, ever since he had been anticipating his military service. But the months had passed and nothing had happened, and it seemed so long ago he had last seen his dark curls. He exhaled and felt the excitement buzzing in his chest. Oh, he had eagerly awaited this day!

Suddenly, he heard a sob. He did not have to turn to see who it was.

“Mater...” he said softly.

“Come here, Publius,” she breathed. “Let me look at you.”

Crassus willingly let his mother, Tertulla, size him up, brush the folds from his tunic and straighten his collar. The smell of her hair, washed in rose water, enveloped him, so much more powerful to him now that he knew he would miss it. While she busied herself with all

those tiny things that were somehow so important to a mother, he looked into her chestnut-brown eyes, glistening with tears. At forty-four, her age was starting to show, but she was still a beautiful woman to behold. More than that, she was an extremely sweet-natured and caring person, and he loved her dearly. He respected his father, but he loved his mother, that was how it was. He put his arms around her, and pulled her into his embrace, kissing her hair and inhaling deeply. She started to sob more freely now and for a moment Crassus felt tempted to join in. The corners of his eyes stung, but he managed to hold it in.

Roman men do not cry, he thought. Not even in the arms of their mothers.

He kissed her on the cheek, feeling the tears on her face, and then gently pushed her away from him.

No time to linger now. Caesar has asked me to hasten.

“Goodbye, mother.”

She grabbed him by his wrists and looked at him with big, red-rimmed eyes.

“Promise you’ll write,” she said.

“I promise.”

In contrast, his father, Marcus Licinius Crassus, had never been of a very sentimental kind—a simple but firm handshake was enough in terms of a goodbye. He did give his son a few instructions before he left.

“Make sure you listen well to Caesar. He is an extremely talented and powerful man, and you would do well to earn his favour. Serve him well, and I’m sure he will reward you amply. Keep your eyes open and never stop learning.” Marcus Crassus took a deep breath. “I am sure you will do fine, son.”

“I will, father, do not worry.”

His father nodded and looked at him a bit more deeply than Publius was used to. Then father squeezed his shoulder, a rare gesture of intimacy for him.

“Give my best to brother Marcus when you write to him,” said Publius, saddened that he wouldn’t be able to say goodbye to his older brother, who was currently serving in the East.

“We will, son.”

After saying goodbye, Publius Crassus walked out the door, feeling the crisp air of the early morning on his face. In the street outside the front door, the slaves were preparing his horse—a spotless golden stallion called Aureus. His father had bought it through one of his agents in Mutina last year and Crassus had ridden it frequently ever since. For his servant Apollonius, another fast horse was already saddled and ready in the street, but not one his father would miss. Crassus was glad he would have Apollonius' company. Father had bought the well-educated and kind-hearted Greek for Crassus when he began his formal education at seven, and they had since grown out to be good friends. Apollonius had always been there when Crassus went out into the Forum to learn how a Roman senator ought to behave. Crassus had grown used to discussing the day's events with Apollonius in the evenings. They would talk about speeches they had heard magistrates give in the Forum, they would discuss court cases they had witnessed, they would reminisce about pretty ladies they had seen in the streets. Apollonius had also been there when Crassus underwent his physical education on the Campus Martius, the Field of Mars. As every Roman nobleman was expected to do military service, it was custom for Roman boys to spend many an afternoon on the Campus Martius to practice the martial arts. Together, Crassus and Apollonius had spent endless hours pretend-fighting with wooden swords, wrestling on the ground and running together along the banks of the Tiber. It was not uncommon for Romans to develop a friendly relationship with their slaves, but in contrast, not many of Crassus' friends were on as close terms with their servants as he was with Apollonius. Most of them had as little regard for their servants as they did for their clothing or animals. To most of them, their servants were just tools. *Things* that were there to make their lives easier. Crassus could never view Apollonius that way, although there was of course a social gap between them that went far beyond the fact that Crassus was free and Apollonius was not. Despite their friendship, Apollonius knew his place. Whenever Crassus would run into his peers and speak with free Romans, Apollonius would remain in the background and would not speak, nor would the servants of the Romans he spoke with. Even when Crassus was with his free Roman friends, their slaves did not have the

liberty to speak. They contrived to remain invisible, ready to do their masters' bidding when required to do so. This meant that most of the day, Apollonius was a tacit companion, for the Forum was usually crowded with friends and acquaintances, and even family. The social world of Rome's elite was relatively small, and if one—like Crassus—had the privilege to belong to one of the senatorial families, one quickly got to know all the others who had the same privilege. As Crassus' father, Marcus Licinius Crassus, was one of the most influential Roman senators, his son Publius by extension was also a known figure, even though Publius Crassus was still far too young to be in the Senate himself. Thus, whenever Crassus went out into the Forum, he very regularly ran into members of the Senate, but also into influential equestrians, who were very rich but who—either by choice or by circumstance—did not have a seat in the Senate. Many of these men spoke to him only by virtue of his father, but he had long grown used to chatting with them, and it was even important that he did. As a future senator and the scion of a noble house, it was never too early to start gaining a reputation and making friends. And in the evenings, after a long Forum day, he never had to contemplate the day's events alone. He could discuss them with Apollonius, who had himself become a Forum expert, just not an active participant. Had circumstances been different, had Apollonius been a free Roman himself, their relationship would have been very different, not something to conceal most of the time. But this was the way of the world, and neither of them thought any less of the other because of it.

When they had mounted, two of the house servants handed them lit torches, to drive off the morning darkness with. Crassus looked back one last time to see his parents standing in the doorway, his father with his arm around his mother. He waved the torch a little awkwardly and then prodded his horse gently with his heels. He took a deep breath through his nose, the morning chill slightly stinging his nostrils.

"Are you ready?" Crassus asked Apollonius, when the Crassus family household had disappeared from view.

Apollonius shrugged, "It wouldn't have mattered if I was not ready. I must go."

An impudent answer many a Roman master would not have condoned from a slave. But Crassus and Apollonius, when private, always tended to be coy with one another. They often joked about the way things were, about the hierarchy circumstance had forced upon them. And Apollonius knew his boundaries. He knew that he could never be impudent if there were others around to hear it.

Dawn had not yet arrived, but the streets were slowly coming to life in the darkness. Countless figures moved about in the dark streets, emerging from the alleys or from the doors of the large houses of the Palatine district. Some bore torches, revealing their faces in the reddish glow, others had to make do with the light of others. Almost all of them were slaves, Crassus knew, or freedmen who were recognisable by their freedman's caps. Roman nobles living in the Palatine had a vast array of slaves at their disposal and would leave all their menial chores—like going to the market, doing the groceries, delivering messages—to their slaves. Even when—or rather *if*—they freed their slaves, their servants, from then on called freedmen, still had a social obligation to serve their former masters, albeit with a touch of more legal freedom. As such, the many slaves and freedmen swarming the streets right now had been sent by their masters on daily chores and in the Palatine district it would be some time before one would see the first Roman citizen. However, at dawn many influential nobles and knights, including his father, would hold their morning reception. At those occasions, the *clientes*, all the people who were bound to the *patron*—those who owed them money, those who had been given favours, those who had once been the nobleman's property, those who were bound by honour or familial ties to their lord—would come calling to pay their respects. Most of them would disappear soon after they had shown their faces, but others would actually come to ask for a favour. Sometimes they needed someone to mediate in a family matter, sometimes they needed a job, sometimes they needed money to pay their debts... But in the case of many patrons, including Crassus' father, the *clientes* were not only ex-slaves and commoners, but also equestrians and senators; noblemen with a degree of influence themselves. The equestrians would come to seek their patron's blessing in their

business venture and would hope that that blessing would come in the form of an investment or a loan, or perhaps even as legislation beneficial to them. The senators already had their seat in Rome's Senate, and thus had a say in Rome's governmental affairs, but many of them had little influence and had a tough political career ahead of them. Having the blessing of a powerful man like Marcus Licinius Crassus could do much to boost their career and so every morning they came to ask for that blessing. Thus, Marcus Crassus had a vast network of men whom he liked to say were 'in his pocket'. Because in return, the *clientes* were supposed to support their patron by doing chores, accompanying him in the streets and out in the Forum, voting for him or his political allies, et cetera. Arguably Crassus' father was the richest man in Rome, and one of the most powerful, and therefore the *atrium* of their house was packed with visitors every morning. Normally Publius Crassus left the house out the back door to avoid the crowd, but now it was still so early the throng had yet to materialise.

Listening to the clatter of the horse's hooves on the flagstones, he rode down the winding streets on the eastern slope of the Palatine Hill and then down the northbound *Vicus Tuscus*. Having a house in the Palatine not only ensured that one lived among the rich and famous of Rome, it also meant that the Forum Romanum, the beating heart of the world, was just down the hill. In the daytime, Crassus would've steered well clear of the Forum if he had no business there, especially when on a horse, for the crowds would have made the going very difficult. Now the Forum was relatively empty still, save for the slave errand-boys and girls scurrying to and fro. As Crassus and Apollonius led their horses between the Basilica Sempronia—a huge rectangular building where both lawyers and businessmen had their offices—and the Temple of Castor and Pollux, the Forum came into view on both sides. It was not often that he saw the great forum like this, devoid of human activity, the gigantic buildings, statues and triumphal arches oddly lifeless. They rode past the Well of the Comitia, where plebeian officials would organise debates or give speeches from the *rostra*, an elevated platform which was adorned with the rams of defeated enemies' ships. In the nighttime dark, the depths of the Well seemed fathomless. It was not so dark, however,

that Crassus could not discern the looming shape of the Curia Hostilia, the Senate House, towering above the Well of the Comitia. This place was truly the heart of the Republic, since it was here that the Senate convened, and where decisions influencing the entire known world were made, by a relatively small group of families. Crassus was a member of one of those families and was very happy that that was the case, he reflected as he gazed upon the impressively tall building. When Crassus and Apollonius had rounded the Well of the Comitia, they sped up a little and rode down the Clivus Argentarius. On his left, Crassus saw that the Temple of Jupiter, high up on the Capitoline Hill, began to be touched by the first pinkish grey glimmerings of dawn. Then, suddenly, the view opened up as they reached the Campus Martius, the Field of Mars. Comfortably tucked into a large bend in the Tiber, this area, dedicated to Mars, the god of war, was the largest open space in Rome. It had originally been the place where Roman men congregated every spring, at the start of the war season. It was also the place where the boys of Roman nobility, Crassus included, were trained in the Martial arts. Together with Apollonius, Crassus himself had first ridden a horse there. He had spent countless afternoons throwing javelins at straw men and fighting with wooden swords.

Nothing like the real thing, he thought dreamily, as he looked out over the fields beyond the Villa Publica, where wisps of morning fog covered the ground like a moist blanket. There were no boys out there yet, but there soon would be. It was Martius, the month which heralded the war season, and in accordance with custom, it would also be the time when Roman boys started their training.

Next, Crassus and Apollonius rode past the *saepta*, the area where during the elections voters came together to vote for the magistrates of their choosing. People also liked to call the area the *oviles*, or ‘sheep-pens’, because the resemblance was uncanny, especially when the voters were driven like livestock into the enclosure, to cast their votes for the election of magistrates—or sometimes the passing of laws. Crassus noted with a smile that a herd of actual sheep had been let loose in the area, to keep the grass neatly trimmed. Even at this early hour, the sheep were already grazing industriously, their merry bleats piercing the crisp morning air.

Dawn was well on its way now, and Crassus and Apollonius were no longer alone on the road. A few other riders, muleteers and wagons had joined them: the business of the day had begun. This was the road one took when one wanted to travel north and thence leave the Italian peninsula by land. From the Forum, one took the Clivus Argentarius, which became the Via Lata, which in turn became the Via Flaminia, running north towards Gallia Cisalpina, Gaul on this side of the Alps.

“Where will Caesar take us, I wonder?” Crassus said, voicing his thoughts aloud.

And, as often happened when he did this, Apollonius answered his thoughts, as an extension of his own mind. “It can go two ways, domine—Illyricum or Gaul. Which would you prefer?”

Crassus turned that over in his mind. “Either will do,” he concluded. “Either will do.”

Caesar had been *consul* the previous year—one of the two leading magistrates in the Roman Republic. Normally, a consul would receive a province from the Senate by lot, which he would then govern in the year after his consulship. As governor of a province, the *proconsul*, as he was then called, would act as the supreme magistrate in that province, having the power to field armies—if there was one attached to his province—to act as a judge with the power of life and death, and to oversee the province’s administration. When Caesar had been consul, things had gone differently. Caesar, a politician of exceptional ability, had allied himself with the two most powerful men in Rome: Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus and Marcus Licinius Crassus—Publius Crassus’ father. Backed by these men, Caesar had been able to gain a governorship over not one, but *two* provinces; Illyricum and Cisalpine Gaul, spread over which was an army of three legions, about fifteen thousand men. And Fortuna appeared to favour Caesar even more, when she struck down Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer in his prime. Celer had been the governor of the province of Gallia Transalpina, but had not yet left for his province when he mysteriously died last year, and it was rumoured that he had been poisoned by his spiteful wife, Clodia. Whether it was divine intervention or the scorn of his spouse that had killed Celer, Caesar’s

allies had been quick to seize upon the opportunity to add Gallia Transalpina to Caesar's command. Since he was already the governor of Gallia Cisalpina, they argued, it would be easy for him to rule the adjoining province across the Alps. Then, the Senate wouldn't have to bother with finding a replacement for Celer either. It just went to show the influence Caesar had in the Senate these days.

More exceptionally still had been the length of Caesar's command. Caesar had been appointed proconsul over these three provinces for five years, instead of just one. Caesar's consulship had been spectacular in many other ways and the man had made as many enemies as he had gained admirers, maybe even more, but for the next five years he would be free from all prosecution. A provincial posting was a perfect opportunity for a governor to enrich himself: he would be able to extend or withhold favours from Roman businessmen and provincials alike, which gave him great influence. It was common for governors to be bribed for such favours and there were also governors who extended the Roman citizenship to provincials—for a price, of course. But for the even more ambitious governors, the authority to field an army sometimes offered the means to start a war, the most lucrative opportunity of all. Technically speaking, a governor required the approval of the Roman Senate to make war, and Rome's wars were mostly defensive, but the glory and riches involved made it very attractive for an ambitious governor to find an excuse to start one. And Caesar was ambitious in the extreme. Although the patrician Julius clan, to which Caesar belonged, was one of the founding families of the Republic, over the centuries they had fallen into relative obscurity. While other families like the Claudii, Caecilii and Cornelii—or of course the Licinii, to whom Crassus belonged—had constantly remained in the public eye, time and time again producing worthy and less worthy consuls, the Julii had for a long time not achieved the prized consulship. Forty years ago, the family had allied itself with the powerful Gaius Marius, and thereby began to reclaim an ascendancy it had long lost. After some of the Julii Caesares subsequently fell victim to the bloody civil war that broke out between Marius and his enemy Sulla, it seemed the family had had a false start, and for a time it seemed like they were right back where they had started. That was of course, until

Gaius Julius Caesar started his way up the political ladder. A gifted speaker, a cunning politician and an able military man, Caesar had seized upon every opportunity to appear positively in the public eye. He had managed to ally himself with the most powerful men in Rome and had consistently received the most votes for every public office he had run for. His ambitious career had come at a cost, however, because sadly these days one could not win an election without money. Bribery was commonplace in the elections and thus the members of more prominent and wealthy families stood a better chance of securing a magistracy. As the family fortune of the Julii Caesares had dwindled long before Caesar had been born, Caesar had to take out heavy loans to fund his race up the ladder. He not only used his money to buy votes, but he also spent it on lavish public feasts and games, always aiming to increase his popularity among the electorate. As a result, his debts were said to be staggering. His tenure as the propraetor of Hispania Ulterior two years before, and the war he had fought there against some of the Hispanic tribes, had certainly helped to alleviate his debts somewhat, but Caesar needed more than a year-long governorship to squeeze enough money from a province to pay off his creditors. Few people knew this better than Publius Crassus, whose father was Caesar's principal creditor, as well as a personal friend. As long as Caesar was proconsul, his other creditors could not recover their loans and his political enemies could not prosecute him for the wrongdoings he had committed during his consulship. However, as soon as his term expired in five years, they would be quick to seize upon the opportunity to take him down. For the moment, however, things were very much looking up for Caesar. With three provinces and four legions under his command, he would have plenty of opportunity to line his pockets. Furthermore, Transalpine Gaul and Illyricum were not the stablest of places at the moment, and it was not unthinkable that Caesar could find a pretext to wage a war on Rome's behalf. As a governor and a commander, he had the prerogative of appointing all sorts of military officers and administrative officials, men who would subsequently owe their position to him, again increasing his influence. Publius Crassus was one of those men, one of a great many, personally asked by Caesar to be part of his staff when he set out for his province. Caesar had good

prospects of a decent-sized war, and Father Marcus Crassus had not let the chance slip to use Caesar's indebtedness to him to further the career of his youngest son. Caesar had assured his father—and himself—that his abilities would be put to good use. Crassus' older brother Marcus was currently serving as military tribune in Syria, under the propraetor Lucius Marcius Philippus, so Father Marcus was secure in the knowledge that both his sons were gaining experience and striving to increase the family prestige.

Crassus and Apollonius rode in silence, partly because sleep was reluctant to release them from its grip, but mostly because they were both in contemplation of what lay ahead, both in terms of time and space. They nodded occasionally to passers-by on the road, but otherwise kept to themselves.

Just beyond the Campus Martius lay the Flaminian necropolis, one of Rome's many graveyards, which were all situated on the outskirts of town, beside the main roads leading out of the city. The tombs of Romans long gone stretched out on both sides of the road, row after row, like a stony forest, painted a pinkish red by the morning sun. Beyond the necropolis lay small pastures, orchards and market gardens, where the first gardeners had already begun their work day. And just a few miles down the Via Flaminia lay the Milvian Bridge, which crossed the Tiber.

As Crassus and Apollonius approached the bridge, they saw that beside the road before it a group of perhaps thirty men and their horses were waiting. As Crassus had grown up in Rome, his eye had become keen in distinguishing men of different classes and positions. Thus, he could easily tell who was who—or what position they held, at least. Those most represented were the slaves. Usually, any group of Roman notables would be accompanied by a vast number of followers and servants, but Caesar had ordered them to bring one each, so they would travel more speedily. Then there were the twelve *lictors*, recognisable by the fact that they all wore the same red cloaks, issued by the state. The lictors served as bodyguards to the Roman magistrates and accompanied him wherever he went. As Caesar was proconsul, he was entitled to have twelve lictores at his disposal, and the fasces—the bundles of rods they all carried—

indicated that Caesar had proconsular *imperium*, the power and authority which only a select few of the Roman magistrates held. The fasces of these lictors all contained an axe, the blade of which protruded from their bundle, symbolising the fact that Caesar had the power over life and death. If he wished it, he could order the execution of a citizen.

Another thing which stood out to Crassus, was that the group mainly consisted of young men. Caesar himself was forty-one, but none of the men he had with him were older than thirty, except for one or two of the lictores, and perhaps a few of the servants. Most of the men here were in their twenties, but some of them were even in their teens.

This too Crassus had all expected, since most of Caesar's staff were already in the provinces with his armies. That included older men whom Caesar had appointed, such as his legates, who served as his lieutenants. Thus, all the Roman noblemen who had congregated today to accompany Caesar to his province were young men, who would serve as Caesar's junior officers: either as military tribunes or—like Crassus himself—as his cavalry commanders.

The youngest in the group, those in their teens, had to be the *contubernales*, the general's tent-mates. It was custom for any Roman general to bring a number of them. They were usually the sons of political allies or clients, nephews, grand-nephews or other boys who had been recommended to the general's staff. It was an age-old custom, which served to provide boys fresh into manhood with practical military experience. As it was expected of all propertied Roman men to serve in the armies for a considerable time, one could not start early enough, it was felt. In theory, it meant that the boys would see the general command his troops, make tactical and strategic decisions, and comport himself in a way that was becoming of a Roman commander. In practice, these boys were usually given menial tasks to keep them out of the way. Their young age meant that they had yet to make a name for themselves in the forum, and although Crassus knew the sons of many noblemen and equestrians, he didn't know any of these, except Lucius Julius Caesar, the proconsul's nephew, and Publius Aemilius Lepidus. There were only a handful of junior officers with Caesar now, as the vast majority of

them were already with the army, in Gaul and Illyricum. Crassus knew all of the junior officers who were with Caesar today, as they were all young men of roughly his age, the sons of senators and equestrians. One of them, Servius Sulpicius Rufus, was a good friend, as they both frequented the Roman courts and recognised in each other brilliant advocates who would go far. Therefore, Crassus had been pleased a few months ago when he had learned that Rufus had been appointed a military tribune on Caesar's staff.

Caesar himself stood out from the crowd, as he generally did, but not only because of the scarlet cloak he was entitled to wear as a proconsul. He was a tall, fair-haired man, handsome of face and slender yet muscular of body. Being handsome was not necessarily an advantage for a Roman senator. It was said that handsome men made poor leaders. That they were too effeminate, too nonchalant to be responsible and strong politicians. It had certainly been a characteristic Caesar's enemies had attempted to use against him, but to little avail. Despite his dashing looks, Caesar had thus far excelled in everything required from a Roman senator. He had climbed the *cursus honorum*—the Roman political ladder—superbly, being elected to every political office in *suo anno*—in his year. This was a sure sign that he was a darling of the electorate. But Caesar had gone further than disproving that a handsome man such as he could not make a good leader. The voters loved him. His dashing appearance was augmented by a huge amount of charm, and he used that combination to devastating effect, not just to befriend senators and equestrians or convince the voters, but also to seduce the wives of many of his political rivals. He had made so many leading figures wear the cuckold's horns, that many a senator now looked at his wife with suspicion. Perhaps a move that had satisfied Caesar's ego, but certainly not one that had lessened his rivals' distrust of him.

"Publius, my dear boy!" Caesar shouted, beaming when he saw Crassus approach.

As Crassus dismounted, Caesar opened his arms, expecting an embrace. Crassus gave the reins of his horse to Apollonius and walked into Caesar's arms, who kissed him on the cheeks and looked at him warmly. The warmth of this greeting did not escape the men around, some of whom looked rather surprised, but Crassus was used

to it. Caesar had long been his father's close friend and had been a frequent guest in the Crassus family residence.

"My apologies for rousing you from your sleep at such a sordid hour," Caesar said, grinning. "Was your old man already up?"

"Yes, Gaius Julius."

"I am not at all surprised. Now there is a man who does not waste his time."

With his hand on Crassus' shoulder, Caesar led him into the group, where Crassus shook hands with Gaius Marcius Censorinus, Gaius Sallustius Crispus and Lucius Canuleius, who were to serve Caesar as military tribunes, and Lucius Aemilius Bucca and Publius Tillius Cimber, who were to serve in the cavalry, like himself. He saved his friend Servius Sulpicius Rufus—also a military tribune—for last, and gave him a warm embrace.

"Good to have you along, Publius," Rufus said with a smile.

"And you, Servius, although the Roman courts will be missing one of their leading lights."

Rufus grinned. "*Two* of their leading lights. Give yourself your due."

Whereupon Caesar cleared his throat theatrically. "*Three* of their leading lights, gentlemen. Don't forget that your proconsul has no mean reputation in the courts." Then he winked. "Although I'll admit I've let my forensic career grow a little stale the past few years."

He clapped his hands. "Well, that's all of us. Let's be off, then! I hope that you're all ready, for we have at least a *nundinum* of hard riding ahead of us."

The riding party crossed the Milvian Bridge at the gallop, an awesome sight and sound, thirty or so riders going at full speed. The excitement among them was palpable and did not need being uttered to be felt. It was plain to see on their faces, and Crassus was no exception. His stomach had been abuzz with pleasant jitters, ever since he had jumped up from his bed this morning. For months, he had waited impatiently for this moment. Caesar had asked specifically that he'd join him when he himself left Rome for his province. That meant that although many of Caesar's appointed officers had left for the army in Januaris or even December, Crassus had had to twiddle

his thumbs and wait for whenever Caesar would be ready. Now that the moment was upon him, impatience gave way to excitement and anticipation. As much as he liked the hustle and bustle of the Forum, debating with philosophers about matters both simple and complex or being in the centre of attention during court cases, it simply did not excite them in the way that military matters did. Besides, he had already made a name for himself in the Forum, while his military reputation was still non-existent, except from an uneventful stint as a contubernalis of Lucius Aurelius Cotta in Africa, six years ago. Now he finally had a chance to truly prove himself, and also to add lustre to his family name.

The Licinius Crassus family was at the very top of Rome's society and had been for centuries. They were not patrician, but plebeian, which meant that the family held the Roman citizenship but was not one of those which had helped found the city, seven-hundred years ago, and who had been part of the original Senate, which advised the kings before Rome became a republic. In the centuries after the founding of Rome, the plebeian class wrested more and more privileges from the tight clutches of the patriciate, and nowadays a plebeian could climb to great heights, without being obstructed by merely his class. Many leading families in Rome were plebeian, like the Pompeii, the Antonii, the Cassii, the Junii and of course the Licinii—Publius Crassus' family. The Licinius Crassus family had produced no less than seven men who had attained the consulship, including Publius' father. Even though in recent decades, Rome had plunged into violent civil struggles, and its elite had been culled of many of its high-ranking members and leading families, the Licinii Crassi had overcome the challenges thrown their way, although not without casualties, as Publius' grandfather and uncle had been murdered during the civil war. Nevertheless, Father Marcus had survived the purges and had fought alongside Sulla, who emerged from the civil war as the victor. And to the victor, the spoils. Marcus Crassus emerged from the civil war not only with his life, but with great wealth too. And so, his son Publius was destined to earn his place in Rome's uppermost circles. Publius was still far too young to be admitted into the Senate. For that he would have to be thirty years of age, and he was not yet twenty-five summers old. But his climb up

Rome's social ladder was already underway—indeed, it had begun long ago. The sons of senators and wealthy equestrians were instilled from a very early age with the idea that they were an important part of this greatest nation of the world. They were taught about the way the Republic worked and the public ladder they could climb. They were told about the greatest men of the Republic—great generals like Scipio Africanus and Claudius Marcellinus, but also men who were more esteemed for their character, like Cato or Cincinnatus—men whom they could emulate or even hope to surpass. From the time the sons of Rome's great could understand the words of their elders, they learned about Rome's history and dreamt about a place in its future—preferably in a position of power. For many young men who aspired to a great career in Rome's government, the road was arduous, and funding their career took up all their time, money and effort. Publius Crassus was very privileged in this respect. Not only were the Licinii Crassi a respected family which could count many consuls in its ancestry, Publius' father was the second-richest man in Rome, and had already had an illustrious career, having achieved the consulship eleven years ago. He was also a shrewd businessman, and had ties with many successful trading companies, as well as property all over the city of Rome, all of Italy, and indeed throughout all of Rome's dominion. Officially, Roman senators were barred from doing business, as it was seen as a conflict of interests, and receiving an income from sources other than property could see a man expelled from the Senate. Father Crassus took great care to ensure that none of his businesses were directly linked to him, employing middlemen to run his various companies for him, and having only sleeping partnerships in these merchant firms, slave trade associations, quarries, mines and other companies. He fooled no one, of course—all of Rome knew Marcus Crassus' character and his sources of wealth. It was such public knowledge that people even sang songs about it—*Crassus, Crassus, rich as Croesus*. But half the people in Rome who mattered were either financially linked to or dependent on Marcus Crassus or were tied to him some other way. The other half was just not powerful enough to do anything about him. And so, young Publius Crassus had not only a famous name, his burgeoning career was also helped on its way by his father's vast fortune, as well

as his enormous network of clients, business associates and political allies. While this put him way ahead of the scions of less fortunate and famous families—or worse still, those of families hailing from outside Rome—he still had to make a name for himself. He had started to do so long before, not by furthering his father’s commercial empire, but by taking cases in Rome’s law courts. Having the privilege of an excellent education, as well as an undying curiosity and a keen mind for problem-solving, Publius Crassus had worked diligently to cultivate a speaking style and knowledge of Rome’s laws and jurisprudence. And so, armed with a bright and learned mind, he had set out to the Forum. At first, his clients had approached him more because of his father’s influence than because of their opinion about his son. After all, he had yet to prove himself and it was not at all certain that he would be as successful an advocate as his father or his more distant relative, the late Lucius Licinius Crassus Orator, who was considered one of the greatest advocates and orators Rome had ever known. Starting off with small family disputes and neighbourly clashes, Publius had steadily developed a reputation of being both a trustworthy advocate and a compelling speaker, bringing the majority of cases he took to a successful end. He had thereby caught the attention of not only the masses who frequented the Forum, but also of great orators and advocates like Marcus Tullius Cicero and Quintus Hortensius Hortalus, who took a great interest in his work and his abilities, and who had come to spectate many of his cases. Thus, the self-esteem, which he had been taught was his birth right, had been reinforced by experience, and the approval of his peers and his elders.

But no matter how much Forum giants like Cicero would claim the contrary, success as a public speaker and a jurist was not enough to win the hearts of the Roman electorate. Sure, the people of Rome liked someone with a silver tongue, who could craft finely worded monologues, who could speak to the lowly and the lavish alike, and who could whip up laughter and tears at will, as well as any actor. But to pave the way towards the pedestal, where one could stand among Rome’s greatest, one needed a reputation of character, a lot of friends, and—above all—military success. War was as much a part of Roman culture as wine, oil and bread. And the young men of Rome’s nobility

were expected to do their part and have some role in Rome's wars. In soldiering, they could prove their worth, gain a reputation for themselves, and even amass some wealth through pay and plunder. That's why Roman boys and adolescents applied for positions in the staff of military commanders, who were mostly senators themselves.

This was how Publius Crassus had come to be enrolled in Caesar's staff. He had applied for a position, and Caesar, partially through ties to Crassus' father, had obliged. Crassus had won this opportunity thanks to his privileged origins, but it was still up to him to make the most of it. If his performance proved to be unremarkable, or worse still; if he failed embarrassingly, his family's fame, wealth and influence would not prevent his name from being tarnished. Moreover, in doing so he would tarnish his family's name. Crassus was very aware of how privileged he was, but equally of how much his career depended just as much on his own achievements.

Shepherds and slaves beside the road stared as the sizeable riding party passed in a flash, to the beat and clatter of many hooves on the pavement of the Via Flaminia. It wasn't long before the Via Flaminia forked, with the Via Cassia branching off to the left, the Via Flaminia itself continuing on the right. Had they taken the Via Cassia, it would have brought them deep into Etruria, the heartland of the Etruscans, one of Rome's enemies in olden times. Nowadays, it was just another region ruled by Rome, one of many, a part of a republic that had long outgrown even the boundaries of Italy, and that ruled territories as far as Syria. Evidently, Etruria was not where they were going. Caesar, in the lead, took a right, and his entourage followed, leading their horses down the wide Via Flaminia. They rode for more than an hour at loin-battering speed before they slowed a little, enough for the men to speak a little amongst themselves.

"Where do you reckon we're off to?" Servius Sulpicius Rufus asked, bringing his horse up beside Crassus'. He looked very uncomfortable and winced a little every time he bounced up and down in the saddle.

"Oh Servius, it's you!" Crassus said, feigning surprise and grinning evilly. "I didn't recognise you with that soprano voice." Sulpicius Rufus was more of an advocate and a politician than he was a soldier

and mocking him for his unmartial disposition had become a cherished pastime of Crassus.

“Ha-ha,” Sulpicius Rufus said wearily. “No seriously. Where do you think we’re going?”

Crassus shrugged, a gesture lost in riding. “I actually have no idea, old friend. Caesar commands three provinces, so it’s one out of three, I’d say.”

“A tried-and-true Forum technique that—using words to say nothing at all,” Sulpicius Rufus grunted. “If this is the way we’ll be travelling, I sincerely hope our destination is Gallia Cisalpina, not Gallia Transalpina or Illyricum.”

Crassus laughed. “I really doubt that, Servius. There is obviously some sort of emergency going on, otherwise we wouldn’t have set out so early, and we wouldn’t travel at such speed. What kind of emergencies do they have in Gallia Cisalpina, you reckon? Some sort of crop disease running rampant in the peaceful Padus Valley? A farmer’s revolt?”

“If there is one, I hope you’ll be the first to be stabbed with a pitchfork, you bleeding *mentula*.”

A remark which didn’t perturb Crassus in the slightest. Sulpicius Rufus was an old friend, and Crassus had long grown accustomed to his acidic sting.

“No, it will be Transalpine Gaul or Illyricum for sure, though which of the two I can’t say.”

“So have your pick between one thousand-mile journey or the other.”

“I hope for your sake it will be Illyricum.”

“And why is that?”

“Because at least that way we won’t have to cross the Alps.”

“Oh *merda*, I had forgotten about those.”

Meanwhile, Caesar had been taking advantage of the slower pace to make his way down the riding party, talking to his travelling companions one by one.

“How are we doing, boys?” he asked cheerfully, when he got to Crassus and Sulpicius Rufus.

“Excellent, Gaius Julius,” said Crassus with equal cheer.

“Yes, marvellously,” Sulpicius Rufus muttered.

“Glad to hear it!” Caesar said, giving Crassus a warm smile. “Forgive me that we cannot travel in state. The situation demands that we reach the province as soon as possible.”

“Which province would that be, Gaius Julius?” Sulpicius Rufus asked.

“And what situation?” Crassus added.

“We’re off to Gaul.”

“Cisalpine Gaul?” Crassus asked, smirking at Sulpicius Rufus.

“Oho no,” Caesar answered, picking up on Rufus’ ill humour and Crassus’ pleasure at mocking it. “We’re going to Gallia Transalpina, Gaul across the Alps.”

“Great,” Sulpicius Rufus said weakly.

“And the situation?” Crassus repeated.

Caesar assumed an earnest look. “Yesterday I received an urgent report that the Helvetii, a large nation of Gauls who dwell north of the Alps on the borders of our province in Gaul, are on the move. My senior legate, Titus Labienus, is there right now with the Tenth Legion. The Allobroges, a Gallic people who live under our dominion, recently became aware that the Helvetii were up to something.”

“The Helvetii...” Sulpicius Rufus said, looking pensive. “I seem to recall some bad business, two years ago. Didn’t they invade our province in Gaul or something?”

“They raided the northern fringes of the province, as well as our allies. A deputation of senators was sent to prevent other tribes to join in their war-making. For some time, things seemed to have cooled down, but it looks like they are flaring up again.”

“Do they plan on invading our province in Gaul?” Crassus asked.

“*That* Labienus could not say, but they were certainly in arms. In the event they were to attack the province, we definitely have to be there.”

“Yes, of course.”

“And even if they aim to go the other way and attack their eastern neighbours, the kingdom of Noricum, we cannot allow that to happen either. Noricum is a Friend and Ally of the Roman people, and the place where we get our finest steel besides.”

“What if they plan to go south and cross the Alps?” Sulpicius Rufus asked with a shudder. “What if they mean to invade Italy?”

“Then we’d have the honour of defending our homeland from the barbarians, instead of only our province.”

Caesar leaned over from his horse and patted Sulpicius Rufus on the shoulder. “A great military feat to add to your already illustrious Forum career, Servius Sulpicius. But no, it is highly unlikely they’ll do that.”

“How so?”

“Because crossing the Alps via the Poennine Passes in Martius is a very dangerous business. I strongly doubt they’ll try that.”

“And yet that is exactly what *we* are going to do, isn’t it?” Crassus asked. “Crossing the Alps in Martius?”

“Indeed, it is!”

“Wonderful,” groaned Sulpicius Rufus.

“Don’t worry, I can always count on Fortuna’s blessing,” Caesar said cheerfully. “And besides, I wouldn’t want to make enemies of your fathers. I promised them I’d give you two a decent campaign you could sink your teeth into. I won’t let you die in the mountains without so much as having had the chance to brandish your swords.”

As Caesar proceeded to the men riding behind them, Crassus and Sulpicius Rufus rode in silence for a while, and Crassus contemplated what he had just learned.

Gaul... A land with a reputation, to any Roman. Mere mention of the land of Gaul and the people who dwelled in it—the Gauls—immediately evoked feelings of terror and disgust, which all stemmed from a mutual history fraught with war. Crassus was pragmatic and did not believe that the Gauls were a uniform race of hulking brutes who feasted on human flesh, who quenched their thirst with the blood of enemies, and whose greed was only equalled by their aggression. This was of course the image portrayed by biased historians and mothers who sought to use the Gauls as a way of disciplining their errant children, warning them the Gauls would descend upon Rome if they did not behave as proper Romans and uphold Rome’s ideals. As blatantly exaggerated as the *Terror Gallicus*—the Fear of the Gauls—had become over the centuries, the fear had to come from *somewhere*. And of course, Crassus knew exactly what the origin of this deeply ingrained terror was. It stemmed from the war with the Senones. It had happened at a time

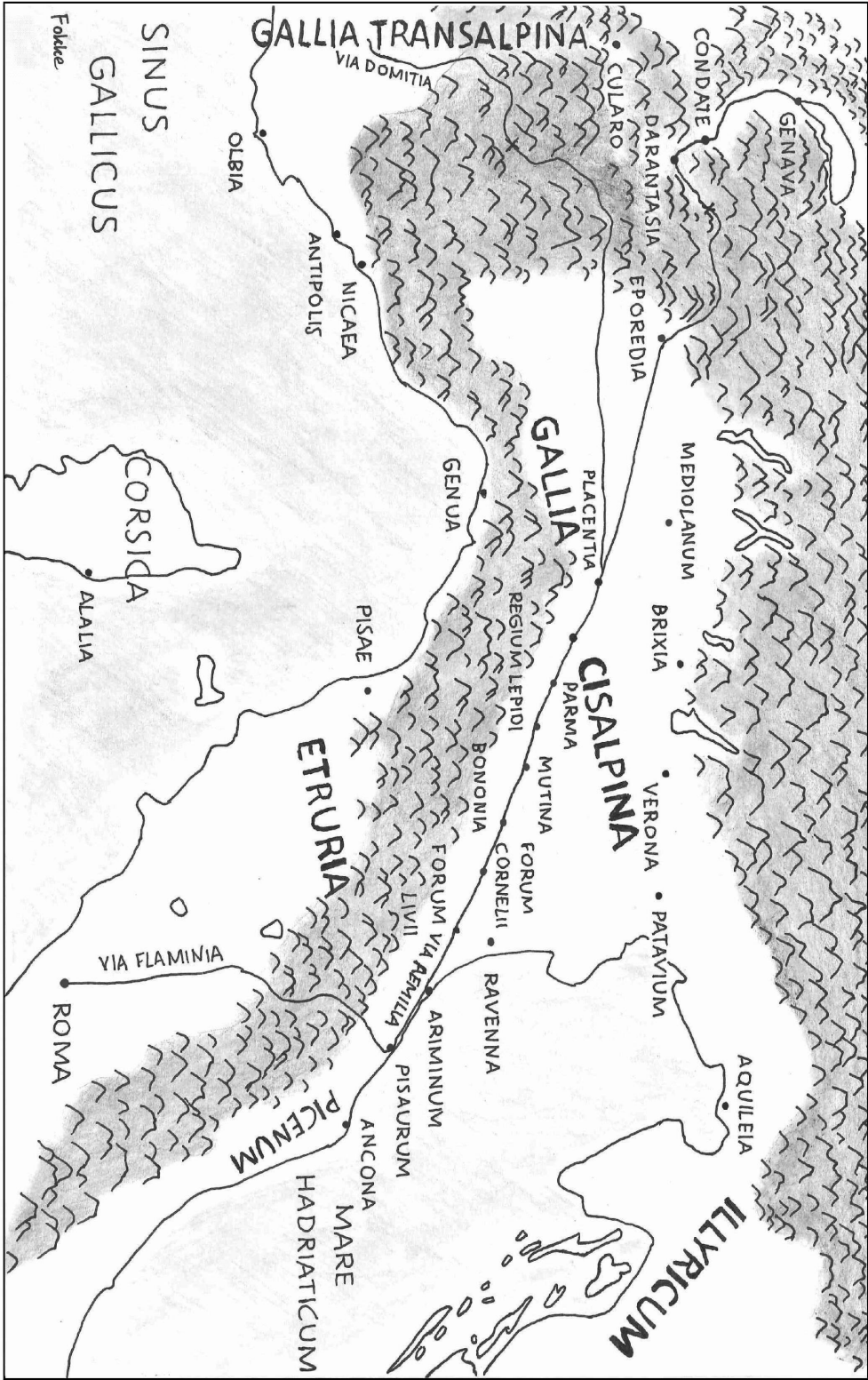
when Rome was still only a fledgling state, not too long after the young city had deposed the last of its kings and had become a republic. Rome had only just begun conquering its neighbours and held but a small part of Italy in its grasp. Thus, it paid little heed to what was happening to its far north. There, in the region nowadays known as Gallia Cisalpina, Gaul-on-this-side-of-the-Alps, wave after wave of Gallic migrants, hailing from Gaul across the Alps, crossed the mountains in search of a new homeland. Some of them were fugitives, fleeing from war or expelled from their homeland by their former rulers. Some of them were voluntary migrants, leaving their kin behind to seek a better life elsewhere. Some were simply war-hungry raiders, looking to take by force what would not be given up freely. The Alpine passes saw a regular stream of Gauls, bands of hundreds, sometimes thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, their possessions loaded on wagons, carts, horses and mules. Men, women and children came down from the mountains like giant herds of belligerent cattle, surging into the fertile plain of the Padus river. The people who lived there, the Ligures, the Veneti, the Umbrians and many Etruscan settlers, were repulsed, killed or conquered. But these invaders were not a uniform people. They hailed from various parts of Gaul across the Alps and went by many names, such as the Senones, the Boii, the Aedui, the Insubres, the Cenomani and the Taurini. They spoke Gaulish, a coarse tongue to the peoples they conquered, but it was soon spoken in every corner of the land. They worshiped gods unknown in these parts, and esteemed valour in battle above all other things. While Rome was busy making sure it became the dominant power in Italy, the Gauls had swiftly become the dominant power in the Padus valley, just north of the Apennines. The threat of further Gallic incursions loomed over Italy, while Rome was unaware of the danger it was in. Soon, it received a rude awakening, when an army of Senones—one of the Gallic peoples that had settled on this side of the Alps—crossed the Apennine mountain chain and started ravaging Etruria. Now, this unknown danger had suddenly come very close. The Etruscans were at a loss at how to deal with this new threat. By all accounts, the Gauls were tall and formidably built, absolutely frightening to behold. They did not seem to fear pain or death, and many of them stood on the field of battle

naked, partially or entirely, their muscular and often scarred bodies a testament to their physical prowess and aggression. Soon, the terrified Etruscans sent envoys to Rome, to beg for their help. Rome was delighted to be called upon as a protector and sent an embassy of noblemen to try to treat with the barbarian invaders. But the envoys they sent were a group of militant hotheads, who made the mistake of taking up the sword and fighting alongside the Etruscans, gaining a minor victory.

But the Gauls, who were far from soundly defeated, had recognised the diplomats on the battlefield and were fuming. The Romans had violated universal custom, for an ambassador was not supposed to fight—an outrage! They sent envoys to Rome to demand the surrender of the diplomats, but Rome was not in the habit of extraditing its own. Worse still, they even honoured the diplomats with positions on the consul's staff. When word of this reached the Senonian ambassadors, they left the city, stating that Rome would soon see them again, but this time with weapons in hand, to claim justice by force, as it would not be given peacefully. A warning Rome had not taken seriously, as it turned out. For when the Senonian army descended down the valley of the Tiber, leaving burning buildings and bleeding bodies in its wake, proclaiming loudly it was going to Rome to seek revenge, it completely caught Rome off guard. Rome quickly put together a rag-tag army, but had little time to prepare, and was only able to meet the Senones eleven miles from Rome, at a small stream called the Allia. What ensued was an outright debacle, as the disheartened Roman army put up little in the way of a fight. Those who stood and fought—not many—were soon slain, and the majority of the Roman army fled—not to Rome, but to Veii, another Etruscan city. Thus, Rome had not only lost the battle, but its survivors were not even in the city to make a last stand there. The Senones proceeded to besiege the city, but the siege came as hard to them as the battle had come easy. Beleaguering cities was not what they did best, and when the siege lasted many months, the morale of the besiegers plummeted, as disease ran rampant among their warriors. They were therefore delighted when the Romans, equally fed up with the siege, offered them gold, if only they would leave, never to return. And so it came to pass, that the leaders of both parties met to weigh

the agreed amount of gold. When the leader of the Roman delegation saw that the Gauls were using tampered-with weights, he protested. But the chieftain of the Senones only laughed and placed his sword onto the weights in the scales, saying the humiliating words: '*Vae victis!*'—'Woe to the conquered'...

Crassus awoke from his unpleasant daydream with a shudder. He knew that many stories about the Gauls were exaggerations or outright fabrications, but never before and never after had Rome come so close to extinction as when an army of Gauls had brought fire and the sword to its very doorstep.



GALLIA TRANSALPINA

VIA DOMITIA

SINUS
GALLICUS

OLBIA

ANTIPOLIS
NICAEA

CONDARTE
DARANTASIA
EPOREDIA
CULARO

GENAVA

CORSIDA

ALALIA

GENUA

PLACENTIA
GALLIA

MEDIOLANUM

PISAE

REGIUM LEPIDI

BRIXIA

ETRURRIA

BONONIA

CISALPINA

VERONA

MUTINA

PATAVIUM

VIA FLAMINIA

FORUM

ROMA

VIA AEMILIA

CORNELLI

AQUILEIA

PICENUM

ARIMINUM

RAVENNA

PISAVRUM

MARE
HADRIATICUM

ILLYRICUM

Folke

“So domine, what do you think of your companions?” Apollonius asked, as the riding party rode past seemingly endless fields of spring wheat, where the Via Flaminia passed a big estate in Umbria. Apollonius had been hovering behind Crassus and Sulpicius Rufus until the latter peeled off, and had waited until his master was alone before he spoke to him. Crassus looked around, but no one else was in earshot.

“I am very happy Servius Sulpicius is with us, at least. I’m not too sure he’ll do great at soldiering, but the company of good friends is to be cherished.”

Apollonius nodded. “As you say, domine. And the others?”

“Censorinus is a decent enough fellow. We’ve bumped into him regularly in the Forum, and he’s quite bright. I can’t say the same for Aemilius Bucca. The Aemilii have a very illustrious name, but most of their family have more money than sense, and I think the Buccae don’t even have that much money.”

“I didn’t even know they existed, honestly.”

Crassus chuckled. “That says it all, really. Bucca doesn’t visit court cases, contiones or public readings. Not what you’d call the scholarly type, nor is he a decent advocate. Let’s just hope he proves his worth in the field, more than he does in the Forum.”

“Well said, domine.”

“Thank you.”

“What about Gaius Sallustius?”

Crassus looked about him once again, to ensure no one was listening in, and then spoke with a more hushed voice. “Well, he’s the walking and talking proof that Caesar is not afraid to associate with less than reputable characters.”

“Isn’t he friends with Publius Clodius and his lot?”

“Indeed, he is. They’re the lowest Rome’s elite has to offer. A bigger bunch of reprobates I have never seen. It wouldn’t have been so bad if they were content with just carousing and whoring and gambling their family fortunes away, but they’re actually meddling in Rome’s politics. A travesty.”

“And Sallustius himself?”

“He’s one of the brighter ones in that group, to be sure, but I’ve seen him more often with a whore hanging off his shoulder than a toga.”

Apollonius smiled. “If he’s such a wastrel, then why did Caesar bring him along?”

“I don’t think Caesar gives a fig if his men are wastrels, as long as they are competent and loyal. Besides, Sallustius and Clodius and their lot are no friends of the conservatives in the Senate, and that makes them ideal bed partners for Caesar.” He looked over his shoulder, but the next riders behind them, Publius Tillius Cimber and Lucius Canuleius, were too far behind to overhear their conversation.

“Cimber I remember well from our summers on the Campus Martius, when we were training as boys. He was quite the brawler, as I recall, a fearsome specimen. A born soldier if I ever saw one. We’ve been moving in different circles since then, but I hear he likes the flagon as much as he likes a fight.”

“You are quite alliterative today, domine.”

“And you are quite cheeky today, slave.”

A look of discomfort crossed Apollonius’ face, and he massaged his rump with his free hand. “Sore-cheeked, surely.”

“Well played.”

“Thank you, domine. So, what of Lucius Canuleius?”

“His father is a client of my father, whom I’ve seen regularly at our house. The Canuleius family are plebeians who’ve been in the Senate as long as my family has, but somehow they have never produced a single consul. From what my father tells me, they’ve barely been hanging on for more than a century now. Lucius Canuleius’ father has indebted himself greatly to my father to ensure they will keep their place in the Senate. I suspect that’s why his son is with us now.”

“But what of his ability?”

Crassus shrugged. “He’s not a great advocate, that’s for sure. I visited one or two of his court cases, but was not convinced. He’s too placid. He can’t whip up a little emotion when necessary. Maybe it’s a family trait, which would explain why the family has never produced anyone of note.”

“And as a military tribune? Would he do well there?”

“Who knows? He’s not a hothead, and I can’t picture him panicking. Surely that has got to count for something. He’s intelligent too. Yes, I think he might do well. I hope he’ll do well, otherwise it’s a bad investment on my father’s part.”

“Master Marcus does not make bad investments.”

“Excepting you, of course,” Crassus quipped.

“Excepting me, domine.”

“All in all, I’d say these men are nothing out of the ordinary. Not terribly incompetent, but no prodigies either. Lads who Caesar has selected to curry favour with their fathers, not because of their exceptional ability.”

“Excepting you, of course.”

“Hah! *Including* me. I don’t have any illusions about why I’m on Caesar’s staff. It’s not because of my non-existent military record, that’s for sure. I owe it to my father, like so many other things.” He grinned at Apollonius. “Including *you*. But the men we are with today are but a fraction of Caesar’s staff, of course. I happen to know many of the others as well—those who are currently already with the legions in Gaul and Illyricum, but also those who will join us at a later time. While some of Caesar’s selected officers are not entirely without merit, it’s striking how many non-entities are among them.”

“Non-entities, really?”

“I can’t find a better word for them. Who’s ever heard of Lucius Aurunculeius Cotta? Or Aulus Hirtius? If their level of esteem is a general indication of Caesar’s staff, I should not think too highly of myself.”

“I would say your modesty already equals that of Socrates, domine.”

“And I would say your sarcasm surpasses that of Aristophanes, slave.”

“Why do you think Caesar has appointed so many... *non-entities*, then, domine?”

“Because the more distinguished families don’t need him, I guess. They see him as a revolutionary or they have a low opinion of his ability as a commander.”

“And what do you think?”

Crassus laughed. "And to think you compared me to Socrates. You're the one who's asking me all the questions. And you're an oily Greek, besides. I think... I think Caesar will do well. He's done well as a propraetor in Hispania Ulterior, why wouldn't he do well now? He's got a nicely sized army of seasoned troops at his disposal."

Crassus looked for Caesar, who was now at the front of the riding column, surrounded by his contubernales, the youngest boys in the troupe, who laughed with their high-pitched voices at a joke Caesar told them. Crassus frowned. "As for him being a revolutionary... I don't know. I hope not."

The riders made good progress, but that was to be expected. Travel was always swift on a decent Roman road, especially one as large and well-maintained as the Via Flaminia. It had been built by the censor Gaius Flaminius more than one hundred and sixty years before and ran like a crucial artery up the upper leg of Italy. Anyone who travelled up to either Gaul or—in the opposite direction—to Illyria and thence to Macedonia, Greece and Asia, would take this road. One could also elect to take a ship, but many disliked travel by sea, as it was a dangerous form of travel, and even more so during wintertime. Thus, the Via Flaminia perpetually saw many traders and travellers alike, and had been scrupulously maintained since its construction.

The riding party travelled with a haste which caused the heads of many other travellers on the road to turn. They stopped very little, occasionally tethering the horses by the roadside to relieve both bladder and bowels, to eat a bite of bread, drink a gulp of water, and stretch their legs. But it always seemed as if they had only just halted before they were off again. At normal speed, a traveller could ride his horse all day, as long as it was properly fed, and decently groomed and stabled. The speed at which they were currently riding, however, would either kill the horse or make riding dangerous, as a tired horse was more prone to stumble and fall. That meant that they had to change horses regularly, and Crassus had to say goodbye to his beloved horse Aureus on the very first day. He had never before travelled in such a fashion, and only now learned what a complicated business it was. They were a riding party of over thirty men and each

of their horses had to be regularly exchanged for a fresh one. Of course, much preparatory work had been done beforehand, as Caesar was both an important man and a very well-organized one. So fortunately, wherever they went, fresh horses were forthcoming, produced either by their hosts or by stables on the route. But every morning, the riders had to get used to new horses, and the horses to them, which led to some hold-ups now and then.

It was customary for Roman noblemen on the road to stay at the houses of notables living along the route. For the host, it would mean that a Roman of note was under obligation to him, a favour he could expect see returned if ever he visited Rome. For the travelling nobleman, the keenness with which people living away from Rome welcomed him into their homes meant that a Roman on the road was never short of places to stay. Nevertheless, Caesar had arranged his addresses long before, leaving nothing to chance. Some of the places they stayed were luxurious villae, huge imposing whitewashed buildings with bright red roof tiles, decorated with expensive artworks, their long corridors festively adorned with colourful frescoes. These huge mansions were complemented by beautiful sprawling gardens, strewn with sculptures, and complete with fish ponds and gazebos.

Others were far less opulent—more typical farmhouses, rustic structures of wood, clay and brick, surrounded by fields sprouting crops, and adorned with big barns and sheds.

One thing all these accommodations had in common, however, was their excellent hospitality. At every single one of them, they were welcomed by a beaming host whom Caesar knew by name—and that went for their wives and children as well. They dined on the richest foods, sampled the finest wines, were entertained with poetry, music, and at one point even a little theatre. Although Crassus had been brought up in the house of one of the richest men of Rome, his father was of sparse habit, and it was only whenever there had been important houseguests that anything other than simple stews or gruels was served. Thus, Crassus did not wolf down the many greasy treats as did some of his travelling companions. In fact, he couldn't eat too much of the food offered to him before he was full, and he soon became more selective in what he ate and did not, as many of

the so-called delicacies rather gave him gastric distress. Caesar, he noted, was equally abstemious, and consistently chose bread, soup and steamed vegetables over pastries, braised meats and stuffed eggs. It was only whenever a host insisted he tried this or that, that Caesar ate some of the more ridiculously extravagant culinary artworks that were served, smiling and nodding and saying that, yes, it was indeed delicious. Caesar had been a regular houseguest in the Crassus residence, so Crassus had dined together with him plenty of times. He had more or less thought, however, that at those times Caesar had eaten sparingly because his father did, and that he had simply adapted to his host's diet out of courtesy. Now he noted approvingly that even though rich food was offered to Caesar, he ate very little of it. Nor did he drink wine, for that matter. He washed down his carefully selected food with nothing but water, and declined wine whenever it was offered.

But that, Crassus thought, is one sacrifice I would never contemplate.

In a way, the luxury and comfort of their nights made the days even harder to bear. Always before dawn, with stomachs still full of dormice, stuffed birds and richly seasoned fish, they would be in the saddle again, hooves thundering on the road as they galloped off. They belched and rubbed sore bellies, and begged Caesar to ease off on the speed, but Caesar would not relent.

"If you can't stand riding hard with a belly bloated beyond capacity," he said disapprovingly, "then don't bloat your belly beyond capacity, for ride hard we must".

One morning, he dismissed one of his twelve lictors, when he could not keep his food and wine from the previous day in. He vomited while riding, spewing out the contents of his stomach in fits and starts every time he landed heavily in the saddle of his heaving horse.

"Make your way back to Rome," said Caesar sternly, as they paused by the roadside, handing the bowed-headed lictor a note sealed with wax. "Tell the Lictors' Guild to send me a decent replacement."

"Please, Gaius Julius," moaned the lictor, his face still pale as snow. "Please reconsider! They'll dismiss me for sure."

Caesar shrugged unsympathetically. "I'm sure they will. They require their staff to function properly as much as I do. And don't you think about making up some lie about me dismissing you for any other reason, Minnius. You give them that note. I'll send a separate letter to the Guild President, so there's no point in trying to weasel your way out of it."

"Yes, Gaius Julius..." the lictor snivelled.

After that, Crassus noted with amusement, the others in the riding company were all too keen to restrain themselves during the evening meals, and their hosts suddenly found themselves with a group of frugal eaters. Even when their hosts insisted that this cheese or that wine *had* to be sampled, they only did so with the greatest reluctance.

Thus, they made their way north at incredible speed. The first day they got as far as Forum Flaminii, in the western foothills of the Apennines, founded by Gaius Flaminius, the builder of the great road. The next day, they dashed through the Apennines, the mountain chain that runs along Italy like a veritable backbone. The mountains were still covered by a thick blanket of snow, but the Via Flaminia was kept free of it by teams of slaves, who also scattered sand and gravel on the road to keep it from becoming too slippery. Thus, barely hindered by the wintry conditions, the travelling party saw the Adriatic Sea the very same day, stopping just beyond Pisaurum.

And on the third day, they hadn't ridden for more than a few hours when they arrived at the Rubico, the formal border between Italy and Gallia Cisalpina. A good moment, Caesar felt, for rest and contemplation. An announcement which was eagerly received by the group, many of whom collapsed exhaustedly onto the damp grass, while others did little jigs to get some feeling back into their legs. Caesar himself took a little stroll along the banks.

"Do you mind if I join you, Gaius Julius?" Crassus asked. He had been meaning to talk to Caesar for some time, but the opportunity never seemed to come up.

"Not at all, my boy," Caesar said, looking a little absent. "Come along."

They did not speak for some time, strolling silently side by side along a little path that ran through the thick vegetation along the riverbank. The going was not always easy. This part of the Rubico was poorly tended to, and the banks were overgrown with reeds and weeds. The path went up and down, regularly narrowed by nettles and thistles, and now and then they had to clamber over tree roots, or wade through a thick layer of mud. A business which was made all the more difficult due to the nagging pain and stiffness in their legs, but they managed. Most of the time, the river was obscured from view due to the trees or the shrubbery or the reeds, but every now and then it reappeared. Crassus had only once before left Italy via land, and then hadn't even turned his head when he had crossed the Rubico, the border of Italy. It could hardly be called a river, and was little more than a stream, even during such a wet month as Martius. And yet it seemed to move Caesar, who was brooding and did not speak. After a while, they came to a little red-brown muddy beach, where a little rowboat had been dragged up to the bank, tied to a willow with a slender, dirty rope. Here, Caesar stopped, staring into the rippling murky water of the Rubico.

"It doesn't look like much, does it?" he asked.

"I was thinking along the same lines, Gaius Julius."

"One wonders why this muddy stream holds such an important place in our hearts. Why—whoever it was—chose this river to be the traditional boundary between our homeland and that of the Gauls. There are more imposing rivers in the area, and yet this is the one."

"Perhaps the Rubico used to be more impressive? Some rivers are known to change in size and course over time."

Caesar exhaled deeply, looking pensive. "Yes, that may be it. And yet... And yet this place holds some magic, some divine majesty. Every time I come here, I sense it, and I take some time before I cross it. Perhaps our ancestors felt it too when they came here and that is why they chose the Rubico to be the boundary. Or maybe it was the other way around, and it was the Gauls who decided this place was important, when they migrated southward."

Although Caesar was the *pontifex maximus*, the president of the college of *pontifices*, and thereby the official head of Roman state religion, Crassus had never viewed him as a very religious man. The

priesthood was as much a political achievement as a religious title. The coveted position of pontifex maximus was a position for life, and added greatly to one's *dignitas*, the respect one received from one's peers. It was a huge boost for a Roman politician's career, and Crassus had never doubted that Caesar saw it that way. Now Caesar seemed to be moved almost to tears by a place, by an idea.

Suddenly, Caesar shook his head, as if to shake himself free from the spell. He turned, looked at Crassus and smiled. "Or maybe, more mundanely, it is just that every time I come here, I leave Italy with an important task ahead of me. The first time I crossed the Rubico was when I went to serve under Gaius Antistius Vetus as his quaestor in Hispania, eleven years ago. The second time was when I returned to Hispania for my propraetorship, two years ago. Now I stand here again. And every time the task grows more important, more grand."

Crassus nodded. Caesar's proconsulship encompassed the governorship of three provinces, and he had four legions under his command. A man of talent would be able to accomplish great things which such means at his disposal. Great things and great wealth... On second thought, Crassus could understand why Caesar needed a moment to consider this momentous occasion. In all honesty, he himself could not begin to fathom what it must feel like to be in such a position. He would know, though, one day. With his ancestry and the means at his own disposal, he would know. He might very well stand at a river one day, on the brink of crossing into the unknown, on the verge of accomplishing great things, and consider his own position. Perhaps he would then even discuss it with a younger man such as he was now.

"I've come a long way, Publius, my boy," Caesar said, once more staring into the murky river. "And yet I have the feeling we stand at a watershed."

Crassus looked at the babbling, brown waters of the Rubico and laughed. "Well, obviously."

Caesar looked around at him again, grinning. "You know what I mean. We stand at a threshold, beyond which nothing will be the same."

"Are you worried, Gaius Julius?"

“Worried? No, not at all. I’ll admit I’ve not left Rome in the best of states, and trouble might be brewing for me back home. And who knows? I may well die while governing my province. But Fortuna has favoured me thus far, and I have proven myself a gifted statesman as well as a commander. I have climbed my way from the bottom to the consulship with an unblemished career, and I am far from finished. No Publius, worried I am not. But nevertheless, I keenly feel the significance of this moment. When I return here in five years’ time, I return either as a decorated war hero, or as an absolute failure. There is no middle ground.”

“Isn’t there? There are plenty of governors who go out to their provinces, make a nice little profit, and then come back without having fought a single engagement. They are perhaps not covered in glory, but they are certainly not seen as failures.”

“I intend to make a bigger splash than *plenty of governors*. If one wants to be the First Man in Rome, which I very much intend to be, one has to look beyond what other men have achieved, and beyond what is sufficient for other men.”

Crassus wondered how his father would feel about Caesar being the First Man in Rome. At the moment, both Caesar and Crassus’ father were certainly among the First *Men* in Rome. But neither of them was the First *Man* in Rome. That distinction belonged to Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, Pompeius *The Great*, who had been Rome’s absolute hero for some twenty years now. Pompeius Magnus, who had fought for Sulla during the civil war, and who had shown himself a gifted commander when he was but in his early twenties. Pompeius Magnus, who had defeated the renegade general Quintus Sertorius—one of the best generals Rome had ever produced. Pompeius Magnus, who had scoured the Mediterranean Sea of pirates. Who had conclusively defeated the eastern potentate Mithridates of Pontus. Who had become consul without ever having been in the Senate, an unprecedented occurrence. The people of Rome loved him. The commoners cheered, clapped, stamped their feet, embraced each other, cried hysterically, whenever Pompeius appeared in public. He had become an institution, in his own right.

Crassus’ father, on the other hand, *loathed* Pompeius. The mere mention of his name sent Marcus Crassus brooding. Publius Crassus

remembered that whenever news from Pompeius' campaigns in the east flowed back to Rome, most of the city was in a state of exhilaration, but his father would lock himself up in his study, burying himself so deeply in scrolls and accounts no mention of Pompeius could reach him.

Marcus Licinius Crassus and Pompeius the Great in many respects had started off their climb up the political ladder the same way, but events had conspired to make them rivals. When the war-hero and exile Lucius Cornelius Sulla returned to Italy twenty-four years ago, civil war erupted between him and the enemies he had left behind. Marcus Crassus and Pompeius, still two young men back then, had both recruited an army and had marched to join him, sure that they were joining the winning side. Both men had been in their twenties, under normal circumstances far too young to make such decisions and field armies. Sulla, however, had welcomed their help, and they had both been instrumental in helping him defeat his enemies. But even though they had both worked towards the same goal, their rivalry had become apparent then already, as they competed for Sulla's favour. A seedling which had only grown as time went by, watered by events. But Fortuna works in mysterious ways. And now, for a few years, Crassus' father and Pompeius Magnus had been working together. It was a story fit for a poet—two political giants, compared to whom all the other players on the board were mere pawns, formerly enemies, now allies. What a tale! It had sent half the Roman Senate reeling. Marcus Licinius Crassus and Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, working towards the same end? Impossible. *Impossible!* There was just no way. Both men had gigantic egos and enormous clout. Their animosity was well-known, so how could it be that they had joined forces? Publius Crassus was looking at the very reason for this conciliation: Caesar. During his career, Caesar had shown himself to be a political mastermind, and few of his feats displayed this as much as the political union between himself, Marcus Crassus and Pompeius Magnus. All three men had been envied, distrusted and despised by some of the more conservative elements in the Senate, and as a result they had all three met with heavy resistance in trying to achieve their political aims. Marcus Licinius Crassus, Publius Crassus' father, was a businessman among senators,

but as a result of hostility in the Senate, he had been unable to help the many businessmen in his clientele as well as he'd liked. Whenever he tried to have legislation passed to this end, it was blocked by his opponents. Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus was a decorated war-hero, and had commanded troops in the East, fighting *and* winning wars for Rome. When he returned, he attempted to find land for his veteran troops, to settle them as a reward for their hard work and bravery. But his political enemies, envious of his exploits, used their influence to prevent this as well. Gaius Julius Caesar was younger than these two men, and his star was still rising. But he too was regularly at odds with the same faction of conservatives, who extremely distrusted these men and did everything they could to prevent them from rising too far above the rest of Rome. It was Caesar, youngest and perhaps brightest of these three men, who suggested they work together. He and Marcus Crassus were old friends, but he himself had also been fairly vocal in support of anything Pompeius Magnus or his political underlings had done in the Senate. Crassus and Pompeius hated each other too much to ever dream of banding together, but with Caesar mediating between them, the impossible had proved possible. Each man individually, however influential, had been unable to overcome opposition alone, unable to swim against the conservative current. But the three of them combined, with all the political clout and ties they possessed between them, had proven a political monstrosity which no amount of conservative resistance had been able to resist. As a result, each of the three had gotten exactly what they had wanted—Marcus Crassus had been able to pass legislation beneficial to his many clients and business partners, Pompeius Magnus had received the land he needed to settle his veteran soldiers, and Caesar had won the prized consulship, and subsequently the governorship of three lucrative provinces: Illyricum, Gallia Cisalpina and Gallia Transalpina.

“Let’s go back, Publius, my boy,” Caesar said, the first of them to have awoken from their shared reverie. “There are yet many hours in this day, and we have a long way to go.”

“Quite right, Gaius Julius. Let us then cross this watershed and be done with it.”

By crossing the minute Rubico, they had officially left Italy, and had officially entered Gallia Cisalpina—Gaul on This Side of the Alps. It was one of the three provinces Caesar had gained with his political manoeuvring, and thus his responsibility as well. But the riders had no intention of staying here to look after Gallia Cisalpina's affairs. It was a peaceful province, hemmed in as it was on nearly all sides by other Roman provinces. It had been Romanised for a long time, as the area had been colonised for nearly one hundred and fifty years. In a sense, it could be seen as an extension or even a part of Italy, considering how long it had been part of Rome's peaceful dominion. And yet, for some reason it was still seen as a province, its inhabitants second or even third-rate citizens. Only half of Gallia Cisalpina, that part which lay on Italy's side of the great Padus River, had acquired the prized Roman citizenship which meant that technically those living on the other side were culturally and legally foreigners. A great injustice, according to some, seeing as they spoke Latin, most of them bore Roman or Romanised names, and it was hard these days to find anyone of note who spoke Gaulish in the Padus Valley. Caesar had always been a vocal supporter of extending the Roman citizenship to *all* inhabitants of the province of Gallia Cisalpina. It was easy to see what would be in it for him, were he to succeed. If all of Gallia Cisalpina were enfranchised, it would be in his debt—a huge power base in the future. Not all the hosts who accommodated them in Gallia Cisalpina—many of them Roman citizens themselves—were too pleased at hearing Caesar's plans. After all, many among them already held the Roman citizenship, and feared that it would weaken their position if it was extended to everyone. Caesar never failed to allay their fears, however, promising them that he would not forget them, nor fail to reward them for their generosity and friendship.

If travelling on the Via Flaminia in Italy had been a swift business, traversing the great Padus Valley was done at lightning speed. The long Via Aemilia, a road which had been constructed by the Roman consul Marcus Aemilius Lepidus almost one-hundred and thirty years

ago, ran as straight as an arrow through the Cisalpine landscape. Cutting through a patchwork of fertile fields and green meadows like a knife, the Via Aemilia was as pleasant as it was practical. A series of Roman colonies seemed to fly by the galloping riders—Forum Popilii, Forum Livii, Bononia, Mutina, Parma... The Roman colonia of Placentia marked the official terminus of the Via Aemilia, after which they crossed the mighty Padus river and took a less well-laid-out road west. The landscape on the other side of the Padus was visibly different from that on the south-side. Where along the Via Aemilia the travellers had still seen huge tracts of land, worked by teams of slaves, here the estates were much smaller, and separated by hedges or low stone walls. Instead of larger villae, these parcels were commanded by smaller clay-brick farmsteads or wattle-and-daub huts. Nearly all of the workers on the land appeared to be free men and women, not slaves. Such a sight had become so uncommon in Italy itself, that it struck Crassus as strange.

While progress had slowed a little as soon as they left the Via Aemilia, the travellers nonetheless managed to make good time. In just four days' time, they were already approaching the northwestern confines of Gallia Cisalpina, as the majestic Alps slowly swam into view. As the riding party passed the sprawling Roman colony of Eporedia, the otherwise continuous wall of mountains opened up into a valley, like a great yawning gateway, from which the Duria river spilled. It came closer and closer, until the mountains swallowed them whole, and they were surrounded by steep slopes, following a narrow valley deeper and deeper into the Alps. The only road in the area led them along the banks of the Duria river, ever upstream, first northbound, but then after a sharp turn westward. As the imposing mountains filled up a large portion of the sky, night fell quickly in these parts, and dusk was already setting in when they rode into a little mountain village on the banks of the Duria river, which was a rock-strewn torrent up here. The village seemed so alien to Crassus' eyes, it had to be Gallic. The houses were clay-and-timber structures and reminded him of shepherds dwellings he had sometimes seen in the countryside in Latium, near to where his father had a villa. These houses, like those, probably only offered room for single families.

Sometimes there were small outhouses, and the village was laced with small wooden and rope fences, probably to keep animals in, rather than keep people out. Indeed, plenty of animals were in evidence, as much to the nose as to the eyes. Here and there, Crassus spied a cow, a few goats, some chickens. But there had to be many more hidden away somewhere than he saw, judging by the smell, and infrequent bleats and moos in the distance. As they rode into the village edge, they dismounted, hoping to find someone who spoke Latin, if not an actual Roman or Italian. They didn't need to bother—their advent had sent the village abuzz, as it wasn't every day a party such as themselves came through these parts. Even though Caesar had stressed they travel plain, with no ostentatious clothes or other ornamentations indicating they were anything other than a band of travellers, it was all too apparent to these mountain-folk that these were no ordinary travellers or tradesmen. Despite their dishevelled look after six days of hard riding, many among them had an unmistakable aristocratic look. One didn't have to have visited Rome to recognise that. If nothing else, their fine horses were a dead giveaway. They might've traded their original horses long ago, but all of their hosts had been wealthy to some extent, and their mounts had consistently been as fine as the area they passed through allowed. The villagers had no idea what they were doing here, but their coming alone was novel enough for everyone to come take a look. In their tow were the children, the most curious and the least worried about being a bother. They came in droves, with eyes like dinner plates, their mouths agape. They reached out with their grubby little fingers, trying to touch the horses and their owners alike. Most of the Roman travellers ignored the children. Some, like Publius Tillius Cimber, shoved them away. Caesar, who led the party, tousled their hair, shook the little hands, stopped once or twice to make a funny face at the children, and very rapidly became their favourite. The adult villagers, who started to show up in increasing numbers, made no move to come too close, but did not call off their children either. They just eyed the riders with mild curiosity, rather than apprehension. Having lived in Rome, arguably the biggest melting pot of cultures in the world, Crassus was accustomed to seeing people from faraway lands, and he had seen plenty of Gauls in Rome. Most of

them were slaves, and were thus clothed by their masters, in either proper Roman clothing or anything cheap they could find. There were free Gauls in Rome too, however, and Crassus easily recognised the woollen cloaks and checkered patterns he now saw on the villagers. However, this misty valley was much, much colder than Rome usually was, and the villagers were swaddled in many more layers than the strange folk Crassus had hardly spared a second glance in the streets of Rome. They were pale of skin, as one would expect of Gauls, and blue-eyed or grey-eyed more often than brown-eyed. The women appeared to be garbed more or less the same as the men, some of them letting their hair hang freely without a headdress. Many wore braids, but again, that was true for the men as well. The only real visible difference was the one Nature insisted upon—the facial hair. Without exception, all of the men had either moustaches, or beards, or both. Crassus wondered if such a cold climate necessitated facial hair, as he stroked the stubble on his jaw with his rein hand.

“Is there anyone here who speaks Latin?” asked Caesar. “Anyone?”

“Indeed there is!” answered a cheerful voice. A figure, a man in his fifties, detached himself from a group of adults, and approached Caesar. Up until that moment, the Romans had lumped him in with the others—his hair was as long as that of the other villagers, and his face was adorned by a big brown beard, with streaks of grey laced through it. Over most of his head, he wore the hood of a blue cloak, the two sides of which were fastened to one other across his chest with a silver brooch. Beneath that, he was wrapped in yet more woollen cloths, with intricate colourful lines crossing at right angles, here passing underneath another, there passing over another, the effect dazzling the onlooker. As he walked up to Caesar, he drew back the hood from his head, revealing a friendly face, just the tiniest bit darker than those of the others, but unmistakably Mediterranean.

“And not the Latin of a Gaul, mind you,” the man said, grinning. “No sir, I speaks the Latin of Rome.”

He held out his hand, and Caesar took it.

“You’re Roman!” he said, astonished.

“Indeed, I am. I hold the citizenship, anyway. Lucius Aemilius is the name. But my friends here just call me Senos—*Old Man*.”

“Gaius Julius Caesar,” Caesar said in a friendly manner. “Proconsul of the two Gauls and Illyricum. But my friends just call me Caesar.”

“Oho! The proconsul, eh? A rare honour. No, a unique one, I’d say! Let’s get you and your men warm, dry, well-fed and well-watered.”

Caesar’s eyes twinkled. “You are a cork to a drowning man, Lucius Aemilius Senos!”

Near the centre of the sprawling town, there was a long rectangular building, alien to Roman eyes, yet completely in keeping with the style of the rest of the village. It barely had any walls to speak of, as its heavy thatched roof nearly touched the ground, with a clay wall hardly more than a ledge beneath it. It had no doors, but an opening in its east-facing front, where leather curtains had been suspended from the roof to keep the heat in. Hanging from the interior triangular ceiling were all sorts of things—tools, herbs hung out to dry, some ornamental bones and skulls, cloths and clothing. As Senos led them in through the heavy leather curtains, Crassus half expected to enter a total darkness, but a couple of oil lamps and roof lights illuminated the few places the blazing orange-red fire in the centre of the building did not. The interior of the place was so vastly different from a house as Crassus knew it. The entire floor was made of stamped earth, with grooves running here and there to carry off any leakage or collected moisture. The heavy thatch roof was supported by a couple of heavy oaken columns, which in turn carried an even heavier looking beam along the building’s length. On either side of each column, more slender diagonal beams ran along the roof’s interior. And that was it, as far as the building’s simple construction went. Here and there, spaces had been partitioned off with wattle-and-daub walls or wicker panels. Other corners of the long hall were filled with all sorts of possessions—sacks, crates, baskets, jars. One area, segmented from the others by the wicker panels, was dedicated to food. There were baskets and sacks containing fruits and bread, as well as some dried meat suspended from the ceiling, and there was a small wooden table with cutting boards and knives on it, a few pots and pans strewn haphazardly along the edges of the “room”. More striking than the alien interior

even, was the vast amount of people inhabiting it, and their diversity. As in the rest of the village, children were *everywhere*, boys and girls mingling freely, some of them playing around, but most of them curiously eyeing the strange guests. But there were plenty of adults too, men and women, their genders a bit more obvious indoors, where they had shed many of their woollen layers.

Senos started rattling off what sounded like orders in Gaulish. One by one, the men and women and some of the children scurried off on some task, while some who remained started arranging a circle of chairs and cushions around the centre fireplace.

“Be welcome, Caesar and friends,” said Senos warmly, spreading his arms in a friendly gesture. “This is my home. No *domus*, to be sure, but I have come to appreciate it as much as one. There is room for five of you here, and my friends and family have room to accommodate the rest.”

“Our thanks, Lucius Aemilius,” said Caesar, gently putting down his saddle bags. “I hope we do not impose. Your family, you say?”

Senos laughed. “There will be no talk of *imposing*, proconsul. This is the greatest honour Fortuna has ever bestowed upon me, and no mistake. I can understand my life situation is a little odd to Roman eyes, and I am equally burning with curiosity as to why the proconsul of the Gauls—and Illyricum, to boot—has seen fit to stop by my humble hovel. But there will be time for that tonight, when you are properly situated. You will find that there is no hospitality like Salassian hospitality, Caesar. Soon there will be a good pork roasting for you, and my son is uncorking an amphora of the finest wine as we speak. I’ve been saving it for a special occasion, and I am sure the gods would deem me a niggard if I withheld it today!”

Any apprehensions the travellers may have had about sleeping in a Gallic village were quickly dispelled by the warmth of their welcome. As soon as they had been shown to their quarters and had put down their belongings, they congregated once more in Senos’ great hall, where the approaching feast was gradually coming into being.

They all took their seats around the fire, interspersed with locals—an uneasy seating arrangement for a few of the Roman

travellers, Crassus noted with amusement. Senos' wife was there, a stout Gallic woman, who apparently had at least some understanding of Latin. There were also some of his children, who also looked like they more or less understood what was being said. The other villagers, however, just looked sheepish whenever the Romans were talking, and sometimes spoke softly amongst themselves.

A large table had been set down on one side of the hall, not for the feasters to sit around, but for the food to be put on display. Many of the women and some of the children were busy preparing food—some were cutting bread or meat into strips, others were tossing salads and stirring sauces. The alluring smell of all sorts of food now started to wrestle with the heavy resident smell burning wood, and the collective stomachs of the travellers started to rumble. But all of this was nothing compared to the pig that was brought in, after an hour or two. The pig, Senos explained conversationally, had been slaughtered two days ago, initially to be partially salted, partially smoked, so that Senos' family and a few of its neighbours could eat from it for months to come. Now that such exalted guests had unexpectedly ridden into town, the original plans for the pig had been sacrificed for the sake of hospitality. Dozens of mouths instantly watered as it was brought in, impaled with a heavy pole, which rested on the shoulders of two of the townsmen.

"No one know how to spit-roast a pig like the Salassi," Senos said, eyeing the pig appreciatively. "The secret is catching all the fat, and then pouring it on the meat again. You don't want to lose the juices, that's the trick. Also, we keep the smoke fumes nice and fragrant with herbs."

"It certainly looks and smells very tasty, Lucius Aemilius," Caesar said.

Crassus knew Caesar well enough that this was not his sort of meal. He looked at him to see if it showed, but Caesar managed to feign an interest in the pork, as he had done with all the other hosts.

"But!" said Senos, standing up for a moment. "Before we dig into this unfortunate animal, let me propose a toast to our exalted guests, and the proconsul in particular." With a round of cheers, the congregation raised their cups, beakers, horns—whichever vessels had been allotted to them—and drank. Crassus, ever curious, had

elected to drink Gallic *cervesia*, and struggled not to pull a face when he sampled the outlandish beverage. It tasted bitter, yet sweet, with hints of fruits he had never tasted before, and it stung a little as he poured it down his throat.

Senos sat back down into his wicker chair and heaved a satisfied sigh. "You will have to forgive me if this place looks nothing like your *triclinium* back home. I hope I have not offended you with my seating arrangements. I must admit I have long lost the habit of reclining, and I have been accustomed for men and women to mingle freely for so long, that up until this very moment I had completely failed to even consider it. Most people here actually don't even use chairs, they just sit on the ground."

It was a Roman custom to recline, which meant that dinner guests as well as their host would lay sideways on comfortable benches, propped up by cushions. The seating arrangements here, a circle of chairs around a fire, were very alien to Roman eyes.

"Think nothing of it," said Caesar cheerfully. "I have travelled enough to know that hospitality comes in many forms. And what is the point of travel, if things are going to be the same way as the place you left?"

"Then I am relieved," said Senos, looking pensive. "You know, Caesar... I can't say I've ever met a proconsul, or any other magistrate, for that matter, aside from the *duumviri* of Cisalpine towns, but I must say the experience rather deviates from my expectations."

Caesar chuckled. "Forgive me for saying so, but you yourself are also not quite what one would expect from a Roman, Lucius Aemilius Senos."

"Hah! Fair enough. As I am a trader by nature as well as profession, let me strike you a deal. I will tell you how I have come to be a long-haired Gaul, and in turn, you will tell me if all Roman senators are as easy-going as yourself."

Caesar spat in his hand and held it out. "You've got yourself a deal, *mercator*."

Unfortunately, Senos had at that moment just taken a gulp of wine. It spurted involuntarily from his mouth like a fountain, the wine hissing in the fire. Then he roared, and a gust of laughter swept through the circle. Crassus, who couldn't help but join in, noticed that

the Gauls were much more passionate in expressing their emotions than the Romans were. While the Romans, even stuck-up ones like Lucius Aemilius Bucca chuckled at this bizarre situation, the Gauls positively hooted, slapping their thighs and embracing one another. Caesar, who tried strenuously not to break out in laughter himself, remained in the same position, his spit-covered hand outstretched, the corners of his mouth upturned in a smirk which threatened to become a smile. It took a while for everyone to settle down, and when Senos had regained his composure, he stood up solemnly, spat in his own hand, and shook Caesar's. If the ice hadn't been broken before, this piece of theatre definitely did the trick. It was Gallic custom not to have food brought, but to pick it oneself from the food table. Thus, the seating arrangements changed constantly, but Caesar and Senos remained close to one another, as the leaders of their respective parties. And Crassus, as he found their conversations most interesting, leaned in to miss as little as possible.

"You speak Gaulish quite well, I must say," said Caesar, sampling some of the roast pork with apparent delight.

"Actually, Salassian comes closer to Ligurian than Gaulish. I guarantee you that whenever I cross the passes and visit the Gauls on the other side, I don't do half as well."

"Whatever it is you speak, you seem fluent."

"That is one of the many boons which twenty-five years of exposure to Salassian culture have brought me. That, a lovely wife, an army of children, and the best chapter of my life by far."

He recounted to his guests how he had once been a citizen of Regium Lepidi, a city on the Via Aemilia, which the travellers had travelled through just days before. When the great consul Marcus Aemilius Lepidus built the famous road in Gallia Cisalpina, which carried his name to this day, he connected many existing towns in the region, as well as founding one of his own—Regium Lepidi. Among the many colonists he settled in the region had been Senos' ancestor, a former Italian slave of Lepidus, whom he had adopted into his own family upon freeing him. By the time Senos himself was born, the family had become one of the most prominent families in Regium Lepidi, acting as middlemen between the *very* productive farmers of the region and the markets along the Via Aemilia.

“A useless link in the chain, if you ask me,” Senos said casually. “Cisalpine farmers are savvy enough to sell their own wares, but my family has made it so that you cannot do without them without being severely disadvantaged. Nothing short of strong-arm robbery. A position, which of course has not endeared my family to me. After a falling out with my father, I moved to Eoredia and worked for a trade firm there for a while. On business, I came here occasionally and eventually I fell in love, both with the place and with my wife. Now, I run most of the trade across the Poennine Passes. I buy in Eoredia and sell in Octodurus, Genava, Darantasia... Even beyond. And every so often, traders come and ask me to be their reseller. I’ve got a couple of wagons and carts, and I know the passes better than anyone of them.”

“So you’re a middleman,” Caesar said slyly.

“Hah! So I am. But not such a redundant link in the chain as my family’s business, I can assure you. Crossing the passes is dangerous, especially the one to Octodurus. I can’t even take wagons or carts up there, it all needs to be done with mules and porters. And the mountain-folk there are even more dangerous than the mountain itself. The Nantuates guard that pass, and they’ll kill you as soon as rob you, if they’re in a foul mood, which they often are. I married my eldest girl off to one of their lads to get concessions—something my wife will never forgive me for. But the upshot of it is that I am nowadays the go-to-guy for both passes, that my sons stand to inherit a healthy and wealthy business, and that I get to spend the rest of my days in the most beautiful place in the world.

“It most certainly is,” Crassus said, feeling it was high time he made his first contribution to the conversation.

“Oh, the lad can talk!” Senos said, feigning surprise. “And who might you be, boy?”

“Publius Licinius Crassus,” Crassus replied, holding out his hand. “Forgive me if I don’t spit.”

“You are forgiven,” Senos laughed. “We’re not doing any business, after all. However... Licinius Crassus, you say? Surely a Licinius Crassus travelling in such illustrious company must be related to Marcus Licinius Crassus, the richest man in Rome, the man who defeated the slave revolt under Spartacus.”