

MARIUS' MULES

THE INVASION OF GAUL



S. J. A. Turney

Marius' Mules

“Marius' Mules: nickname acquired by the legions after the General Marius made it standard practice for the soldier to carry all of his kit about his person.”

Dedicated to my beautiful wife, Tracey, who has
done nothing but encourage me,
so it's mostly her fault!

Also to my grandfather, Douglas, who is responsible
for my irrepressible love of history.

Published in 2010 by YouWriteOn.com

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Second Edition

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Interregnum (2009)

For twenty years civil war has torn the Empire apart; the Imperial line extinguished as the man Emperor Quintus burned in his palace, betrayed by his greatest general. Against a background of war, decay, poverty and violence, men who once served in the proud Imperial army now fight as mercenaries, hiring themselves to the greediest lords. On a hopeless battlefield that same general, now a mercenary captain tortured by the events of his past, stumbles across hope in the form of a young man begging for help. Kiva is forced to face more than his dark past as he struggles to put his life and the very Empire back together. The last scion of the Imperial line will change Kiva forever.

Ironroot (2010)

Captain Varro of the Fourth army is about to have the worst day of his life. Wounded in battle and fearing for his life and his future, he stumbles upon a plot that reaches deep into the past and into the roots of everything in which he believes. Accompanied by a young engineer from his unit and the daughter of his commander in chief, he begins to unpeel layers of treachery and murder that threaten not only himself, but the people that he loves. Ironroot is a tale of treason and revenge set in the world of the Interregnum, some twenty years after the events of that book.

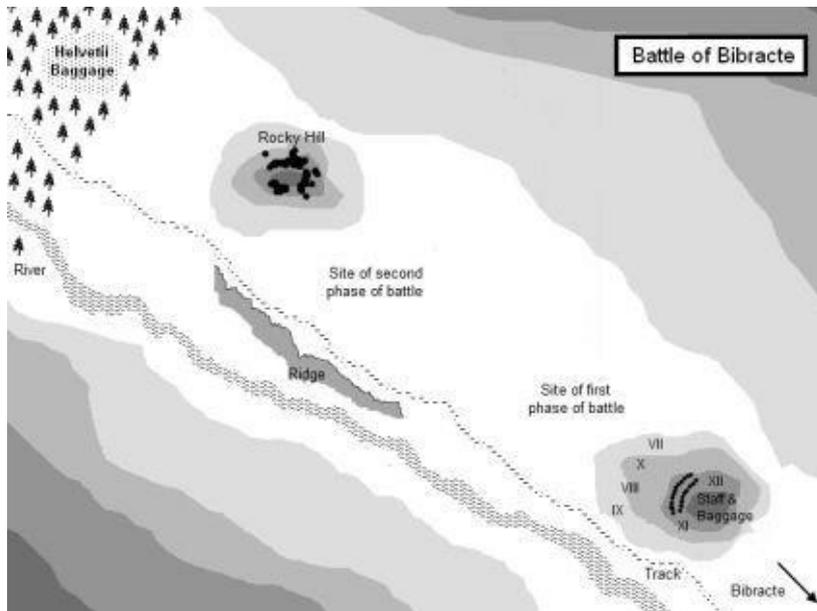
Marius' Mules II (2010)

57BC. The fearsome Belgae have gathered a great army to oppose Rome and Fronto and the legionaries assemble once more to take Caesar's war against the most dangerous tribes in the northern world. While the legions battle the Celts in the fiercest war of Caesar's career, the plots and conspiracies against him, both at Rome and among his own army, become ever deeper and more dangerous.

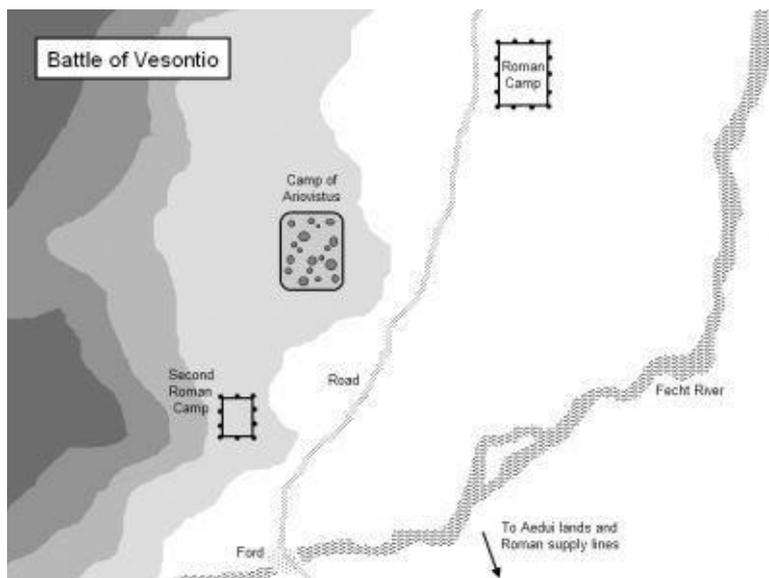
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Part One: Acts of Aggression



Part Two: Ariovistus



Dramatis Personae (List of Principal Characters)

Marcus Falerius Fronto

Commander of the Tenth Legion, ex Commander of the Ninth, Veteran of the Spanish Wars, friend of Caesar and native of Puteoli in Italy.

Gaius Longinus

Commander of the Ninth Legion, ex cavalry tribune in the Spanish Wars and old acquaintance of Fronto.

Gnaeus Vinicius Priscus

Chief centurion of the Tenth Legion

Lucius Velius

Senior centurion training officer of the Tenth Legion

Quintus Balbus

Ageing commander of the Eighth Legion.

Aulus Crispus

Commander of the Eleventh Legion, ex. Civil servant in Rome.

Titus Balventius

Chief centurion of the Eighth Legion, veteran having served several terms of service.

Aulus Ingenuus

Lesser officer of Eighth Legion's cavalry wing

Gaius Tetricus

Military Tribune attached to the Seventh Legion and expert in military defences and earthworks.

Florus

Young legionary in the Tenth Legion

Quintus Atius Varus

Prefect of the Ninth Legion's cavalry wing

Quintus Titurius Sabinus

Senior staff officer

Titus Labienus

Senior staff officer and lieutenant of Caesar

PART ONE: ACTS OF AGGRESSION

Chapter 1

(Tenth Legion's Summer Camp at Cremona)

“Cursus Honorum: The ladder of political and military positions a noble Roman is expected ascend.”

“Tarpeian Rock: Cliff on the Capitoline Hill of Rome from which traitors were hurled.”

“Latrunculi: Roman board game involving stones of two colours on a board, resembling the Chinese game of Go.”

Marcus Falerius Fronto trudged through the mud between the headquarters pavilion and his tent, kicking in irritation at errant stones, which disappeared into the dark with a skittering sound. He would have given good money to be back at the winter quarters in Aquileia, on the warm Adriatic. For all that Cremona was a reasonably sized town with all the facilities and amenities a Roman gentleman could enjoy, the camp itself, almost a mile away, was much the same as any practice camp throughout the Empire: cold, damp and dirty. Like many of the mighty General's senior officers, Fronto's quarters were considerably closer to the centre of command than he would truly wish. Though the concentration of the officers made for better organisation and a certain camaraderie, the great Caesar slept little and late and had a tendency, when thoughts occurred in the dark of night, to wander among the tents of his officers and seek out their opinions of grand designs and obscure schemes. It was said by some of the men that Caesar never slept, though Fronto knew the truth, having just removed the chalice from the General's hand, emptied the dregs outside the tent and draped a blanket over the figure slumbering in the folding campaign chair.

Fronto's mind wandered back over the briefing earlier in the evening and the array of maps on the campaign table that he had tidied and gathered up before he left. Some of the officers present had had the foresight to heavily water their wine, knowing how Generals tended to drag out these meetings for many hours, considering every minute detail. Those who were unprepared had begun to doze hours ago and would be looking to the security of their careers in the morning. The General himself, however, always drank a half and half mixture of good Latin wine and water, remaining sober until most of his officers had left, and never drinking enough to lose control of his tongue. This was a man with many secrets, Fronto was reminded.

There had been much speculation among the officers over the last couple of days as to why Caesar had come to Aquileia at all, yet alone to a practice camp for three legions in the hinterland. He

had been quietly settled in Rome ever since his governorship had been confirmed and had shown no special interest in the troops under his command. Then suddenly he had arrived in camp with an entourage of his favourite staff officers and a wagon full of maps and supplies. Fronto had been apprised of the imminent arrival of a party of soldiers by the sentries, had immediately recognised the standards and the man in the red cloak on the white horse, and had alerted the other officers without delay. He had his own theories concerning the General's presence.

Caesar had had a command tent raised and with barely a nod of recognition to the officers with whom he had served before, called for a meeting and disappeared within. An hour later, the General had briefed all present on the nature, geography and politics of Gaul and the Gaulish tribes, though still no one had been enlightened as to the reason for this meeting and the information divulged.

The ordinary civilian back in Rome tended to label anyone from north or west of Roman territory a 'Gaul' though in truth, the land to the north was held by the Helvetii, above them the Belgae and the Germanic tribes and to the far west, by the sea, the Aquitani peoples. The Gauls consisted the tribes that lay between these others.

Still, sometimes a sweeping generalisation made things easier. And no true Roman could think of the Gauls without a thread of bitterness weaving into his heart. Even the two and a half centuries that had passed since those barbarians had broken the walls of Rome and desecrated the holy places had not dampened the ardour of many a Roman nobleman. Fronto had a suspicion. He would not dare voice it yet, but the nagging feeling remained that the General planned to take the legions into Gaul and, despite the worries and implications of such an act, he could not ignore the quickening of his pulse when he thought of Romans wreaking long awaited vengeance on these uncivilised brutes. The days people said that the Gauls were a different people; that they had a culture. To Fronto, they were just another enemy; to Caesar, a stepping stone.

His mind wandering from subject to subject, deep in concentration, Fronto realised with a sudden jolt that he had walked far past the officers' quarters and almost to the edge of the camp. There were very few soldiers outside at this time, and most of those were going about their various night time duties. None of them, of course, caught the eye of the senior officer walking in their midst. Fronto looked up at the moon. Late. Very late. By rights he should be abed now like the rest of the officers and yet sleep was far off. Reasoning that lying staring at the roof of the tent was unlikely to help him pass into the arms of Morpheus, Fronto reached out and grasped a passing legionary by the arm. The startled boy, who couldn't have been more than eighteen, stammered a respectful greeting that the officer waved casually aside.

"Is there anywhere open in the town that serves a reasonable wine at this time?"

The young soldier's brow creased. "I believe there's an inn down near the river sir, which stays open almost 'til dawn." He suddenly pulled himself to a semblance of attention. "Not that I've been in such a place of course, sir."

Fronto smiled. "Relax, lad. I'm not looking for infractions of the rules, just a drink." He patted the boy on the shoulder and flipped a small coin into his hand. "Next time you get there, have a drink on me. I have a feeling you won't be seeing the place for much longer."

He walked off in the direction of the west gate, leaving the puzzled-looking soldier standing in the street, staring at the coin in his hand.

Passing through the gate with only a brief question from the duty centurion, Fronto left the camp and started down the hill toward Cremona and its warm and friendly drinking establishments. There were few locals around at this time, and those that he encountered were generally drunk and semiconscious.

conscious. He made his way down to the river, his mind once more on the great General he had left mere quarter of an hour ago.

Caesar was a man who had been acclaimed as a hero and an advocate of Roman expansion for his deeds in Spain. Indeed, to the General himself none of the officers would say differently. Many personal journals, however, would give another impression. Those who had had the dubious honour of accompanying the General on his rise through the *cursus honorum* could see a side of the great man that the public would never learn of. The man was a genius; of that there could be no doubt. No modern-day Scipio, or Gracchus, matched today only by the great Pompey or Crassus. He had come from a noble family, though not a particularly wealthy one, and had risen rapidly through the shrewd borrowing of money and the clever manipulation of the general mass at Rome. In this Fronto could see unlimited ambition; had seen it time and time again in the General's plans and actions. It was largely this ambition, smouldering scarcely concealed beneath the surface that led Fronto to suspect what was coming. Like a number of the other officers in Caesar's command, Fronto had served with the General in Spain, on the campaign that had given Caesar a piece in the great game, and yet put him in extreme danger of prosecution for war crimes. There was no doubt in his mind that Caesar's campaigns could be a path to glory, but they could also be a path to damnation.

Fronto turned a corner and saw a sign for a tavern. Here in Cisalpine Gaul, the influence of Roman civilisation had all but wiped the Gaulish culture from the land, and the street and tavern could easily have been on the outskirts of Misenum or Puteoli, his home town. After three days of almost constant rain, one could only wade through these badly paved streets and, as Fronto reached the front door, under the swinging, rusty sign, he took advantage of the boot scraper by the door, leaving large clods of earth. The inside, lit only by three small oil lamps, was dingy and only four men sat around the room, sipping wine or swigging beer. Fronto ordered a good wine and took a seat in a dark corner. His thoughts turned once more to the people known as the Gauls. It was a misnomer really. The innkeeper who had served Fronto's drink was *theoretically* a Gaul, though Fronto could hardly compare this Latinised man with his slight Etrurian accent to the Gauls that had broken Rome so long ago. Nor, for that matter, with the feared Belgae or Helvetii, hardened by centuries of war among themselves and against the Germans across the Rhine.

Still, the Helvetii would be the ones to watch. Not only were they just over the border from here but there had been rumours emanating from their territory for a long time now. Roman merchants had made a killing there, buying up food stocks and carts and pack animals and all manner of other goods. Each officer had his own opinion on the activities of the Helvetii, ranging from an expansion into Sequani territory, to crossing the Rhine and claiming land in Germany, to invading Gaul. There was no doubt that the Helvetii loved to make war, and the only question really was against whom. One thing that all were sure of was that the Helvetii, warlike as they were, would never consider attacking the might of Rome. And yet two things nagged at Fronto. First was Caesar's sudden fascination with further Gaul and its tribes, and the other was a conversation he had had yesterday with a local merchant. The man, from whom many of the officers had been purchasing items for months, had been packing all his worldly goods onto a cart when Fronto came across him. Upon being asked why, the man had replied "Have you never seen the birds fleeing the forest when a predator enters?" and had refused to be pressed further.

Matters to think on; Fronto pondered as he drained the glass. He purchased another at the bar and then returned to his dingy table. The General was renowned for his ability to think problems through obliquely. Was it possible that the General had already taken stock of what had happened and used it to create a hypothesis of events in the near future? Did Caesar actually think that the Helvetii

would invade Roman territory? Were it from anyone else Fronto would have laughed off such an idea but from the General? Fronto had played the man at Latrunculi several times and considered it a personal mark of glory that he had once won a game. Fronto was at least as well versed in the rules of the game as any other well-bred Roman, and better than most, but Caesar was another matter entirely. He had a disturbingly clever habit of having calculated every possible combination of moves at least seven turns ahead. It was this gift for strategy that made Caesar as dangerous in the field as he was at the board.

In response to his unsettled feeling, Fronto had put his command, the Tenth, on a state of alert within moments of Caesar's arrival at the camp. There had been plenty of complaints from the senior centurions of course, but Fronto had silenced them with a look. He had commanded legions before under this General and others. The senior men of the Tenth knew that; they also knew that something was in the wind. Fronto also had a habit of being prepared.

He sighed and wondered whether he would be a legionary officer all his life. He had served in a number of theatres and commanded a number of legions as and when he had been required. Commanding a legion had always been a temporary post at the whim of the army's General, and in those days Fronto had been keen and continually seeking a new challenge. Caesar had broken tradition in many ways, including his tendency to leave an officer in command of a legion for long periods. Thus in Spain, Fronto had commanded the Ninth for a considerable time, becoming very familiar with its officers and their quirks. In fact long-term command had permanently changed Fronto's views and attitudes toward the military, and he could see the benefit of building a rapport with a legion.

His command in Spain had perhaps tied him a little too closely to Caesar and he had narrowly escaped prosecution along with the General, after which he had tried to dabble in political circles in Rome as the *cursus honorum* demanded. A dull and incomprehensible two years in Rome had given Fronto enough of a taste of Rome's political life to know that his place was in the field, and he had applied to the Senate once more for a command. For over a year he served in various locations, never tied to a unit for more than a month, his reputation constantly growing, until he heard of his old patron's appointment as governor of Illyricum and Cisalpine Gaul. Sure of his path, he had visited Caesar and asked the General if there was a place in Gaul for him. Caesar had smiled and, without hesitation, sent him to Aquileia to command the Tenth, whose current commander was returning to Rome.

He was fated to the soldier's life. He would never sit in the Senate; he may never make Provincial Governor, and he was resigned to that. Only two things still ate away at him late at night. Firstly there were the young, go-getting officers, just starting off on the *cursus honorum*, who could not comprehend why a man would backtrack down the rungs of the ladder. Fronto suspected that they laughed about him behind his back. The other was, of course, his family. Neither his mother nor his sister had ever forgiven him for his abortive political career, when he had been expected to make Senator at least. He knew he was bright enough, as did the womenfolk, but he preferred the clear-cut blacks and whites of military command to the soul-destroying greys of politics. Throwing back the last of his second unwatered cup faster than he probably should, Fronto stood, thanked the barman, and made his way out of the tavern.

The streets of the town were muddy, dark and deserted, and Fronto carefully picked his way through the murky alleys until he came out near the bridge. So deep in thought was he that he almost knocked down the figure entering the alley as he left it. Gnaeus Vinicius Priscus, the Tenth's leading centurion, staggered against the wall, righted himself quickly and saluted Fronto. The officer waved the salute aside and growled, covering his own embarrassment.

“Priscus, what the hell are you doing sneaking around down here at this time of night? Haven’t you got duties in camp?” He grasped the centurion by the shoulder fastenings of his mail shirt and turned him around, walking him out of the alley.

Priscus looked momentarily taken aback and for a second a fleeting and knowing smile crossed his face before professionalism took over. “Sir. I was, in fact, looking for you. One of the gate guards told me you had come down here. We intercepted a messenger coming to the camp. I thought you would want to know before word reached the other officers.”

“A messenger?” Visions of Gaulish hordes sweeping south across the Empire’s borders ran unbidden through his mind. “A messenger from whom?”

Priscus stumbled on the dark road; looked up in time to see that they were emerging into the faint circle of light cast by the torches on the camp’s walls.

“One of our friendly merchants, up on the frontier, near the Helvetii. It seems big things are happening over the border. His message was for the officer commanding, but I got a few hints. There’s been some kind of failed coup in the tribe’s leadership.” Priscus held up his hand and signalled to the guards, who swung open the great wooden gates to allow them entry.

Fronto smiled. “You did well, Gnaeus; very well. Caesar will almost certainly call another staff meeting, and it stands the Tenth in good stead if we appear to be well prepared. Get back to the other officers and call up all the officers of the Tenth. As soon as I’ve seen the General, I’ll want to call a private meeting.”

Priscus saluted again and turned as they reached the gate, giving the agreed password to the guards. As the gates swung shut and the centurion made for the Tenth, Fronto called out after him “Caesar and Gnaeus, get some of the good wine out of storage. This might be a long meeting and a long night.” Priscus grinned and set off at a jog.

Fronto made his way through to the commanders’ tents and, reaching his own, examined himself in the large bronze mirror he had recently purchased from a vendor in the village. Generally presentable, though with muddy boots and some very serious-smelling horse dung on the hem of his red cloak. He looked around the tent for his spare boots and laid eyes on them where he had left them beneath his small table. Muddy, but better and, with a bit of hasty rubbing, the dried mud would come off. The sounds of activity outside heralded the fact that the news had reached the General. Fronto hastily cleared off the worst of his boots and contemplated what to do about the cloak. He couldn’t present himself to the general smelling like a livery stable. In a rush now, he opened his travel chest and retrieved a crimson cloak from inside, neatly folded the way only his sister could have done. How long had it been since he had worn it? So few occasions to dress up these days. Needless to say, some of the others would take every opportunity to rib him about this over the next few days, but the smell of horse shit would be a stronger fuel for their jibes.

Moments later a breathless messenger reached his tent and knocked on the wooden post at the door. “Sir, the General...”

Before he could finish the summons, Fronto was out of his quarters in full dress and marching toward the command tent. Over his shoulder he called back “Yes soldier, I know.”

* * * * *

Fronto had been the first to arrive at Caesar’s tent by a clear minute and, though he was no

waiting outside the flaps, he knew that his promptness would have been noted. As several of the low ranks passed by in the torchlight, the officer was sure he heard a few badly-concealed sniggers. Ignoring them, he kept his eyes on the tent's entrance, waiting for Caesar's attendant to call him. Footsteps behind told him that the other senior officers had arrived.

A jolly voice behind him said "Why, who is this joining us for the briefing? Could it be the great Scipio? Or perhaps Apollo himself is deigning to lighten our lives with his *radiant* presence." Slight subdued laughter rippled down the line behind Fronto.

Without turning his head, Fronto addressed the voice.

"Longinus, you missed your chance for a career on the stage. What are you doing here, among these serious and talented military types? Have you tired of talking to your mule?"

He heard Longinus' intake of breath, ready to launch into a diatribe on the nature of Fronto's family and their resemblance to certain species of amphibian. The new commander of the Ninth resorted to this subject in every one of their arguments whenever he ran out of clever things to say. Fronto suspected that the slightly portly officer resented the fact that his command of the Ninth had come only because Fronto had resigned his commission with that unit on his return with Caesar to Rome. Moreover, the Ninth still held Fronto in esteem since he had been with them throughout the time in Spain.

Before Longinus could get his comment out, Caesar's servant appeared at the doorway.

"Gentlemen, the General will see you now."

As the officers filed into the tent, Fronto took the only seat he knew to be comfortable. Once the eleven men were seated, a curtain to the left was pulled aside, and Caesar himself strode in. The officers stood as one, saluting and bowing. Caesar acknowledged them and sat, followed by the other. As his servant poured a glass of wine, the General opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. His eyes had fallen on Fronto. A warm smile spread across Caesar's face.

"My dear Fronto, did my summons catch you on your way to anywhere glamorous and important? How inconvenient of me." Fronto could feel the colour rising in his cheeks as laughter filled the room.

He carefully folded back the sides of the cloak so that the red lining covered the worst of the golden images on the outside. His sister had had the cloak made to order by one of the best men in Rome to celebrate Fronto's triumphant return from Spain a few years ago. The golden gods and victories cavorted with mythical creatures and horses, covering most of the plain red. A single gold thread hung from one shoulder where Fronto had, after one particularly drunken evening unsuccessfully tried to unpick a representation of Pegasus. He gratefully accepted the proffered glass from Caesar's servant and sank his face into it. After a moment's steadying he lowered the glass and in a gesture that he felt sure few of the other officers would dare match, fixed Caesar with a warming smile, holding his eyes.

"General, as you know the history of this cloak, you know it has only ever been worn once in public, and it places upon your revered self a mark of great distinction that I would do it for your presence."

Caesar's smile faltered and Fronto wondered for a moment if he had gone too far. A moment later, however, the General laughed uproariously. Some of the officers joined in, though Longinus retained a frustrated silence. The General slapped his knee and wiped a tear from his cheek.

"Fronto, you are well named. You have more front about you than any man I know. Very well."

honour me with your priceless cloak and pray that the next time I see your charming sister I do not tell her what you really think of this ostentatious piece of apparel.” He took a sip of wine and sat up straighter.

“To business gentlemen. Your orders and your explanation. You will immediately, upon leaving this briefing, return to your legions or other duties, and see that the entire camp stands to. I want all three legions ready to march at an hour’s notice. Paetus, you will have the camp made ready for the army’s march. Cita, get all the necessary provisions and pack animals for two weeks in the field. Almost the entire camp will be leaving, including the cavalry.”

Looking around, Fronto counted the faces registering surprise with satisfaction. He returned his eyes to the General.

“Now, I expect you’re all aware by now that a messenger reached the camp tonight. He had come from the north, where he was accompanying a trader dealing with the Helvetii. There has been something of a disturbance among the tribe’s leadership. Some of you may remember the name of Orgetorix from earlier briefings. He has evidently tried to arrange a coup for control of the tribe, in association with other ambitious men of the Aedui and Sequani tribes. I rather gather that this failed, as Orgetorix committed suicide four days ago whilst on trial for the attempt. In the normal flow of events, this would stand well for Rome. The man was obviously a rabble-rouser and could conceivably have united three tribes into a confederation on our border. Unfortunately the latest news, from two days ago, is that villages and towns of the Helvetii are burning across the length and breadth of the mountains. Those of you who have studied this particular tribal area will be aware that the Helvetii are by far the strongest group, and are unlikely to have been bested very quickly by anyone bar us.” He paused for a moment, smiling.

“However, it is a strange custom of these peoples to destroy what they leave behind. Not, like us, to prevent them being used by erstwhile enemies, but to help bind the tribe together and provide the added impetus needed to keep such a group collected and moving with purpose.” Again the General paused to make sure he was being followed.

“Gentlemen, the Helvetii are moving. The whole tribe.” At a gesture from Caesar, his servant unrolled a map on the low table between them all. The map covered the territories of Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul and the surrounding areas.

“As you can see, the Helvetii are bordered to the east by Lake Geneva. To the north lie the Rhine and the powerful German tribes. To the west there is only a narrow route between the Jura Mountain and the Rhone, through unstable territory held by other tribes. And of course, to the south, Rome. Wherever the Helvetii plan to go, if they are bringing their whole tribe and all of their possessions, they cannot realistically attempt any route other than through our lands. They have two days’ advantage on us if we want to meet them in battle in open land, but they are burdened and slow. I will be leaving for Geneva some time tomorrow morning, and taking a few key personnel with me. I have sent word to Massilia to have the Eighth Legion march and they will meet me there. The three legions here will move out two days after I do, and will make for Vienna on the Rhone. They will wait there as long as necessary until I send the signal. The force I shall take to Geneva should be more than sufficient to turn the Helvetii away, given the terrain. I want the other legions in reserve at Vienna as a reserve in case the Helvetii make their way around us, and in such a position as to be able to move anywhere along or across the border in the shortest time possible” Caesar sat back, while the others continued to pore over the map.

Fronto frowned and leaned forward.

“Sir. If, as you say, the Helvetii are coming south, why do we need to keep reserves? Surely we would be better on the forced march to Geneva with you. Then we could meet them in open battle straight away and finish them.”

Caesar smiled.

“Fronto, I have planned ahead. One legion and associated auxiliaries should be able to hold them off at Geneva should they not acquiesce to our demands. After that, they will have no choice but to head west along the river and the Roman military will be waiting there for them too. I shouldn't worry too much about missing all the fun, Marcus, as you're one of the key personnel I'm taking with me to Geneva.” He turned back to the others.

“On a more personal note, the Helvetii are one of the most powerful tribes in all the Gauls, and have become complacent and over-familiar in recent years. They constantly cross our border in small groups for mercantile reasons. They seem to have no respect for the frontier and no fear of the might of Rome. Regardless of the tribe's intentions, I will not countenance their crossing into Roman territory and, should they make any attempt to do so, I will meet such a move with equal force.”

Caesar's voice began to drone in the ears of Fronto. He spent some time calculating the amount of time he'd now spent awake. It was, by his rough estimate, somewhere around four in the morning. He had been up at dawn to oversee the drill on the siege engines and had eaten only once, at lunchtime, despite the tasty morsels being offered at the briefing. Moreover, the other officers had been caught up on at least an hour, as had the general himself. Almost twenty four hours solid. No wonder things were starting to run together. With a start, Fronto realised his hand had slipped sideways and a dark wine had dripped onto his cloak. Prying his eyes open, he forced himself to concentrate on the general commander. With a second jolt, he realised that the General had finished.

Caesar leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. “I think that's all, gentlemen... unless there's anything you wish to ask?” The officers remained silent, some shaking their heads until, at a dismissive gesture from the General, they bowed in turn and made their way out of the tent.

As Fronto stood and bowed, trying hard not to let the ornate cloak fall over his head, Caesar gestured to one side. Obediently, Fronto stepped to the side of the tent and waited until the other officers had filed out. With a word, the general also dismissed the two servants, who left through different flap and into separate quarters. Once they were alone, Caesar heaved a sigh of relief and gestured Fronto back to a chair.

“For the sake of all that's good and sacred, Fronto, please take that cloak off. It's as distracting for me as it is annoying for you.” Caesar reached down to the table by his side and poured two more goblets of wine. Fronto set his eyes on the goblet as he unfastened the last catch of the cloak, and wondered exactly how much wine he had drunk tonight. Certainly more than he should have done on duty night. And yet his head felt surprisingly clear, if tired, perhaps due to all the exercise, concentration and fresh air. With a smile, he let the cloak drop to the floor and accepted the goblet. Almost as an afterthought, and with pictures of an irate sister swimming in his head, he retrieved the cloak, folded it carefully and placed it by his side.

“Caesar, I appreciate, as always, your private invitation to talk, but I really should be returning to the Tenth and having them stand to.”

The General cast his eyes over the slightly ruffled officer and a smile played around his lips.

“Marcus, how long have we known each other now? I would think the best part of ten years

yes?"

Fronto nodded. "I would think so sir, yes."

"In all the time I have seen you in command of a unit, that unit has never been unprepared for anything. I would lay a hefty wager that the Tenth are already standing to. It's not entirely unreasonable to suspect that your juniors are already having the tents pulled down and stowed. I'm well aware that you were half-expecting something like this tonight, especially since you were standing outside in answer to my summons almost before I had sent it. That Priscus is a good man. Only he were a man of standing and property, he would be a good choice, I think, to step into your shoes when you try for Senatorial power."

Fronto growled; a low growl, but nevertheless, Caesar must have heard it. "I'll never make a politician. I don't have your gift with people."

Caesar smiled. "No, perhaps not. But your family will never rest until you achieve some kind of position. Still, in time we may be able to do something about that. You stick with me Marcus, and we'll both go a long way."

The General stood for a moment and wandered around the tent, casually pausing by the main door and glancing out into the night, before letting the flap fall closed.

"There is no doubt in my mind Marcus that you are exceptionally intelligent and astute for a 'career' soldier. I tend to keep an eye on your behaviour, as it tells me whether I am being too open or too closed, too friendly or too harsh. I also understand that you either know or suspect a great many things that have flown like a flock of geese over the heads of the rest of my command. The time has come to be very frank in our discussions, Marcus. If you will talk straight with me, I will extend you the same courtesy."

Fronto's eyes darted around the tent nervously. This was the sort of situation that had seen a number of loud-mouthed officers fall from grace in the past few decades. Still, he *had* known Caesar for a long time, and better to open oneself than to be thought secretive.

"Very well sir."

Caesar once more took his seat, and refilled the goblets. "Tell me what you suspect and I will confirm and clarify for you."

Fronto swallowed and took a deep breath. "Here we go," he thought, "time to leap from the Tarpeian Rock." He leaned forward to narrow the distance between the General and himself and spoke in a low, conspiratorial voice.

"General, we go to war against the Helvetians tomorrow, do we not? I know there is a thin veil of embassy over the campaign, but let's see this as soldiers. I cannot believe that you have set up this elaborate trap for anything less than a definitive military action. Permit me to speak *very* freely, sir?"

Caesar nodded.

"You have more ambition than I. Possibly more than anyone alive in the state, including the great Pompey; ambition that could carry Rome to the limits of the earth. I mean no insult by this; I'm merely stating the facts the way I see them. I believe you will find a reason to wage war on the Helvetii, even if they go home in peace. I think you need it for your own personal self-worth, you need it to win the support of those in Rome who currently favour others, and you need it in order to create further opportunities."

"Further opportunities, Marcus?" Caesar smiled a grim smile, and Fronto swallowed again, aware of the danger in which he had just placed himself.

“The Gauls sir. The Helvetii are not important enough for you. Certainly not enough to keep the four legions you have in these provinces busy. No, you want the big fish, sir, don’t you? You want the Gauls. It’d be a massive campaign, but that doesn’t matter, does it sir? The Gauls are famous. All Romans know them. Many fear them. Most hate them. To destroy the Gauls would be to earn a place in history, sir. Or am I far from the mark?”

Caesar sat silently for a while, swilling the wine around in his cup. After a disturbingly long pause, he once more raised his head and fixed Fronto with his mesmerising stare.

“I was right about you Fronto. You could be exceptionally useful to me, but you could be a dangerous man. Few others have ever spoken to me like that, and none of them have come away better off for the experience. But you? You’re career military, with absolutely no pretensions to politics and no designs on Rome, and I find that, against all odds, I actually trust you. Do you know how many people there are in the whole of the Empire that I feel I could actually trust? Very few indeed, even in my own family. Very well; you have had your say, and I shall explain.”

“You are, of course, entirely correct in so far as you go. I have no intention of letting the Helvetii go, though we must not be seen to go wading into Gaulish territory unbidden. If we wade into Gaul, we have to manufacture a reason that will put all of Rome behind us. The Helvetii are merely the key. That idiot noble of theirs, Orgetorix, had worked so hard to bring himself to sole power over the Helvetii, and to create a union with a number of other tribes. If he had succeeded, we would have our reason now.”

Fronto frowned, mulling through the information. He suddenly looked up, his eyes glinting.

“You don’t want to destroy the Helvetii at all, do you sir? The legions by the Rhone aren’t there to trap them, but to divert them and drive them on. You want them to go west, into Gaul, where they become enough of a danger for you to take the battle to them, yes?”

“Very good, Marcus. Very good indeed. Yes, we need the Helvetii to become enough of a threat to warrant Senatorial approval of our intervention. And once we’re deep into Gaul...”

“Nothing can stop us, sir?” Fronto smiled.

“Exactly! I know you have no interest in politics, Marcus, and I know that you’re only truly happy when you’re involved in a bloodbath, so I trust you won’t cause me any trouble?”

“Trouble, sir?”

“Marcus, there are a lot of people who would consider this plan as dangerous; even reckless and the greatest benefit at the end will be felt by myself and my army. Senators and fat noblemen get very testy when so many resources are put into something with so little visible benefit to them. There are few I can take on campaign with me that I can trust to do everything within their power to achieve the goals we set. I think you are one of them. The Tenth Legion will take prime position among the forces in Further Gaul. I want you and yours to show the Helvetii what it means to face the world’s greatest fighting force, and I want the other legions to look at the Tenth and marvel so much that they strain to be like them. Do you understand?”

Fronto’s face fell into his usual sour and serious cast. He mulled over, only for moments, what his commander had just implied.

“Caesar, as always, I and the Tenth are at your command.” A small grin passed across his face. “Although I would respectfully submit that the Tenth already have that effect on their enemies and

friends, sir.”

His eyes narrowed again as a thought struck him.

“By the way, sir, I may have drifted off a little toward the end, and I don’t remember hearing who was coming with you to Geneva.”

Caesar sighed.

“Longinus, yourself and Tetricus, a tribune from the Seventh. Oh, and that vicious-sounding training officer from your Tenth will be staying behind.”

“Why sir? Why us, when you’ll have the commander of the Eighth there with you? Who will command these three legions on the march? And why is Velius staying here?”

Caesar leaned forward.

“Sometimes I wish you’d listen so that I didn’t have to go over the same things twice. Longinus is a good man with cavalry, and we may want his advice on skirmishers and scouts. I’m sure you remember some of his cavalry actions in Spain. Tetricus because he’s an old hand at planning defensive earthworks. You because I need you for advice on a command level at the least. And Velius is staying here because of the training needs of the two new legions.”

Fronto’s elbow slipped from the chair arm.

“What new legions?”

Another sigh.

“Good grief Marcus, how long were you asleep? I’ve already had Sabinus out tonight setting up the recruiting staff. I want enough men to create two legions within the week. They will then march to Geneva to meet us with your training officer in command. I hear good things about him.”

Fronto leaned back and then levered himself out of the chair.

“Very well sir. If you would excuse me, I would like to get back and see what Priscus has done in my absence. Our legion insignia’s probably pink now. Thank you very much for the wine and your confidence.”

The General nodded as Fronto retrieved his cloak, stood, bowed, and left the tent.

* * * * *

The camp of the Tenth was a flurry of activity as Fronto returned. As he made his way between the cookhouse and the latrines, a legionary wearing only his tunic and covered in pig-grease stumbled and came smartly to attention, almost concussing himself with the tool he carried.

“At ease, soldier. Have you any idea where centurion Priscus is?”

The soldier relaxed and swung the heavy head of the pick-axe to the ground.

“Sir, the centurion is over near the granaries, giving out orders sir.”

With a nod of thanks, Fronto made his way toward the wooden granaries that stood at one end of the Tenth’s quarters. Priscus was standing on two of the projecting beams at the base of the granary itself, around two feet off the floor. A standard bearer and three legionaries with excused-duty status stood around his feet with wax tablets, checking and marking as the centurion called out. As Fronto approached with a smile on his face, Priscus waved an arm toward one of the most complex areas of activity. Over the hubbub, he bellowed

“Arius, you piece of horse excrement! Wet side OUT, damn it, wet side OUT!”

Arius, a recent addition to the officer class and the most junior optio of the legion, jumped hearing his name and dropped the huge, half-folded tent into the mire that was the result of so many pairs of hobnailed boots. The tent fabric landed in the brown liquid with a sucking sound and Arius turned to face Priscus, his face slowly turning purple. The other soldiers laughed raucously as they went about their own efficient business.

Priscus' eyes flashed momentarily and he held his vine staff, one of the centurion's badges of office, in the air. “There's a vicious battering with this awaiting the next man who laughs at an officer. D'you understand, you swine?”

The soldiers immediately went quietly back to work, and Priscus looked down at one of his helpers.

“How many does that make so far, Nonus?”

The legionary drew the stylus down the list and looked up. “Twenty eight down and stowed seven in progress sir.”

As Priscus opened his mouth again, he noticed Fronto standing next to one of the supply wagons with an amused look on his face. He glowered.

“With all respect sir, if you think this is funny, perhaps you'd care to have a try?”

Fronto grinned and stepped forward.

“I've had my fair share of this, Priscus, don't you worry. Oh, and I think you can relax the pace a little. I've just been past the Ninth and they haven't struck a single tent yet. I daresay the Tenth will be eating a hearty breakfast and relaxing on the grass while the other legions are still working. They may complain now, but they'll be happy in the morning.”

“It is the morning. Do I take it you'd like the others rounded up sir, for a briefing?”

Fronto nodded. “I'll be at the bath house on the edge of town. No one else here will have time to use it at the moment, and the locals don't go at this time of night, so it seems a good place for us to have our little meeting. Get them rounded up and in the changing room in about thirty minutes.”

Priscus returned the nod. “Nonus, you take charge of this rabble for the time being. I'm going to find the other officers and go meet the legate.”

Ten minutes later the officers and senior NCOs of the Tenth met at the changing room of Cremona's secondary bath house. The main baths were in the centre of town, in constant use by the citizens and closed late at night, but a secondary bath had been constructed outside civic limits largely for the use of the military when they came here during the summer months. This one was never closed and rarely visited by civilians, staffed only by soldiers in need of extra pay. Fronto was already lounging in the hot bath when his officers entered. At the sound of their arrival, he raised himself from the steaming water and, wrapping a towel around his waist and shuffling his feet in wooden sandals, made his way through to the steam room, beckoning to Priscus as he did.

Priscus gestured in return with the small amphora of wine he carried. “Didn't bring any goblets sir. I presume there are some hereabouts?”

“On the table near the entrance, next to the strigils.”

The officers stripped out of their uniforms, none of them wearing armour due to the nature of their current labours and, each pouring himself a goblet of wine, made their way into the baths. N

urban complex this; no perfumed Greeks here to scrape the day's dirt away with a strigil. Three of the officers collected the scrapers from a table on their way into the steam room. Within minutes all were present among the clouds of steam, seated around the walls, with their eyes on Fronto.

“Gentlemen, you are all aware that we are about to break camp. All the legions and support units will be on the march in a couple of days. I realise that this is relatively short notice after such a prolonged period of inactivity, but it is the intention of our illustrious general to meet the Helvetii who are of a mind to cross the borders of mighty Rome on their way to another part of gods-forsaken Gaul and are already on the move. Caesar, along with the Eighth, who are coming up from Massilia and a few of the senior officers, will be heading for Geneva tomorrow for the initial negotiations and conflicts. The three legions here will make for Vienna and will stay there and await the almost certain arrival of the Helvetii.”

One of the centurions from the Seventh Cohort leaned forward.

“Sir, if he expects a big fight, why not take all the legions to Geneva and finish it there.”

Fronto swallowed. He knew the truth of course, but couldn't allow word of the General's future plans to leak out. He hated lying to his men.

“The General does not want to meet them in a defensive situation by the river. Siege warfare has rarely been a bonus for the legions. He would much rather drive them into open land and then meet them on a field where our full tactics can come into play. Caesar feels they might need to meet the full force of Rome in order to deter them and, if they will not be deterred, to chastise them appropriately. Do you all get my drift?”

The rest of the room's occupants nodded their understanding, the gestures half-lost in the increasing steaminess of the room. Priscus was the only one to speak.

“Sir, you've heard about these Helvetii. They say they're the fiercest of all the tribes in the east. They're not going to turn round and go home, even if we put all the legions in their way. This is going to come down to a hard fight, and you know it. And I'm sure Caesar will know it. That's why he's preparing a trap, isn't it?”

Fronto smiled a grim smile.

“Very astute Priscus. Yes. I think it's safe to say there's a fair fight coming our way in a few weeks, and I intend the Tenth to be ready for it and to do our traditional job of showing up any other unit in the campaign. To this end, I want all drills doubled, even while on the march. Every evening, in camp, the men will be put through their paces. I'm afraid, however, that I'll have to leave the details to you, Priscus. I am one of the people the General intends to take to Geneva, so you'll all be reporting to Priscus here as senior officer. There's a lot of upheaval coming, but I have procured for the legion twenty amphorae of good Campanian wine and two cows for butchering. At the end of every day's march and at the end of the training sessions, the top three men will dine on choice beef and drink good wine as a reward for their efforts.”

Velius, renowned for his crude and occasionally brutal humour and his heartless training techniques, and the only officer to have brought his vine staff into the baths, looked up at his commander.

“Sir. What else? You're not the sort of man to call a meeting in the middle of important work to give us orders you could have given in front of the men and in the morning. What's the murderous bastard got planned for us?”

“Velius,” Fronto replied through gritted teeth, “your mouth is going to be the death of you.” Regardless of your opinions, that is no way to speak of the General, and I’ll caution you against doing it again.”

He sighed and looked around.

“You are, on the other hand, entirely correct.”

“This is on a strictly need-to-know basis, and I believe Caesar would not consider it necessary for you to know. You will not, under any circumstance, pass this information on to another living soul.”

The tension in the room was tangible.

“I can’t say too much at this time, but prepare yourselves for a long and drawn-out campaign. I believe it is very unlikely indeed that we will return to Cremona in the near future, or even at all. So anything you can’t take tonight, and make sure the men aren’t carrying useless extras with them.”

“We’ll be going on beyond the Helvetii then? Perhaps having a go at the Gauls?” Priscus was nearing the edge of his seat, anticipation clearly audible in his voice.

“I’ll give you nothing further, but mark what I said. I don’t care if the other legions aren’t prepared and have to leave their accumulated goodies to rot in a camp they won’t be returning to, but the Tenth will be prepared for anything the General cares to throw us into.”

He turned his gaze to Velius.

“You, however, have a different job. Your optio will be commanding your century on the march. I’m afraid your training talents have been brought to the General’s attention. He’s raising two new legions here within the week. You will be assigned both of them for training. They will each be given only a partial officer staff for the time being, so you’ll be effectively in charge. As soon as you’ve got them assembled, they’re to march on Geneva and meet up with the General’s forces there. You’ll have to train them on the move and in action, I’m afraid. They’ll only receive a senior command unit when they reach Geneva.”

Velius opened his mouth to object, his face already taking on a slightly purple colour. Fronto waved his hand at the centurion; a gesture for silence.

“Now, gentlemen, I’m going to oil down and get clean, then have a refreshing cold bath. Would one of you like to be a bootlicker and get a strigil to help me?”

(Around the city of Geneva and the fort of the 8th Legion)

“Honestia Missio: A soldier’s honourable discharge from the legions, with grants of land and money, after a term of service of varied length but rarely less than 5 years.”

“Optio: A legionary centurion’s second in command.”

“Decurion: 1) The civil council of a Roman town. 2) Lesser cavalry officer, serving under cavalry Prefect, with command of 32 men.”

It had been a long and gruelling march to this outpost on the edge of the Empire. Fronto wandered around the ditch and among the defences outside the ramparts and stockade of the regular summer training camp of the Eighth. They were taking great care to make the camp secure, as the general belief among the common soldiery was that the legion might be staying here for some time. The Eighth, though based in Massilia, were the only legion assigned to Transalpine Gaul and, as such, they were required to make their presence felt along the entirety of the Rhone’s east bank, from the Mediterranean to the lake at Geneva. Their summer training quarters were occupied as regularly as their base in Massilia, and had all the facilities of a permanent installation.

He glanced over at the frightening form of Balventius, the scarred and partially blinded primus pilus of the Eighth, standing on a wagon and directing a unit of men deepening the defensive ditch. Behind him, the civilian settlement lay sprawled from the river up the slope of the valley, with the summer fort of the Eighth built up against the walls of the town. Glancing east, Fronto could see small detachments of the legion building a new temporary camp less than a mile distant and he knew, even though he couldn’t see them, that more soldiers were following suit on the other side of the town. Caesar had decided, quite rightly, that it would save a lot of training time for the two new legions when they arrived to find their camps already prepared. All in all, when the Eleventh and Twelfth turned up, the best part of fifteen thousand heavy infantry would lay in a line a mile and a half to either side of the town of Geneva.

It had been hard to ignore the droves of locals flooding the roads leading south out of Transalpine Gaul, their worldly possessions crammed in carts or strapped to their backs. The legion had been in Geneva for only a few hours, after meeting up with the General’s party near Ocelum, but the atmosphere was already tight and nervous. Legions were at their best in open territory, with full scope for manoeuvre. Sieges rendered the heavy shock tactics of the Roman army impossible, and made the officers and the men equally uneasy.

Fronto glanced across the bridge and at the mountains beyond. Somewhere beyond sight, the entire Helvetii tribe was moving and, if Caesar and the fleeing locals were correct in their surmise, the tribe would be coming this way; to this very bridge. The sound of hoof beats behind startled him from his chain of thought.

Caesar reined his white charger in beside his officer and looked down.

“Fronto, I’m going to need you at the Headquarters building within the next half an hour. Leave someone else in charge here.”

“Sir.” Fronto nodded, tearing his eyes from the ongoing work.

As the General rode back toward the Headquarters building he had commandeered from the legate of the Eighth, Fronto wandered up to the cart.

“Balventius, you’re in charge here unless your commander appears.”

Fronto turned his eyes to the bridge once more as he walked toward the fort’s west gate. He couldn’t shake off the feeling that the Helvetii were already there, watching him. He amused himself for a few minutes watching the engineers working on digging lilia by the gate. Unaware that there was an officer nearby, their language was crude and violent, and shovelfuls of mud and clods of earth flew in seemingly random arcs from the depths of the ditch. The Eighth had been raised almost sixty years ago for the protection of Cisalpine Gaul and the Northern provinces after the victories of Rome over the Allobroges and the founding of Geneva as a Roman city. With the civil wars earlier in the century and the frantic raising and disbanding of legions throughout this turbulent time, few legions could claim a heritage that long. The Seventh, Ninth and Tenth were of much the same age, and Fronto had seen a marked similarity between the men of the Ninth and Tenth between commands. There was such a similarity again between his own Tenth and this Eighth Legion. He had heard tales of the commander of the Eighth, an old career soldier who had managed to achieve a remarkably long period in command of one unit. The men around Fronto now could just as easily have been his men. He smiled. Despite having commanded the Tenth for little over a year, Fronto already felt very close to his men and, he thought with more than a little pride, his men seemed to feel a similar bond with the commander. A clod of earth landed on the toe of his boot.

Five minutes later, the commander of the Tenth arrived at the headquarters building at the center of the Eighth Legion’s summer base. Standards, flags and pennants stood and hung outside. A staff officer Fronto didn’t know came to the door and waved them inside. Fronto removed his helmet, placing it in the crook of his arm and falling into step behind the unknown staff officer.

Caesar sat in his own campaign chair behind a desk littered with paperwork. Standing around him were various secretaries and officials of the city and, seated to one side were Longinus and Tetricus, along with Balbus, the legate of the Eighth. Although he and Fronto had never met, the Eighth were an experienced and decorated legion, and Balbus’ reputation preceded him. Fronto gave him a respectful nod, which was returned as Balbus stood to acknowledge their arrival. The other legion commander was a lot older than Fronto, with a receding hairline and a round face. He looked rather jolly to Fronto, as though he should really be sitting at the theatre in a toga, rather than here in cuirass. Tetricus was middle-aged with a shock of dark hair above a pale and serious face. Longinus had the same disapproving expression he habitually wore.

Caesar was deeply involved with one of the secretaries and Fronto waited fully five minutes before the general closed his wax tablet and the attendants hurried from the room.

“Ah Fronto, sorry about that. Would you take a seat, please?”

The officer made his way to one of the chairs around the large central table, while Caesar continued to put the papers away in order.

“I’m very busy this morning, so this will have to be brief. I have sent a request out this morning to the decurions of Geneva and the surrounding settlements, asking them to furnish me with every available able-bodied man. I intend to raise a number of auxiliary units here, some of which will

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