

'Crescent Cove, The War-horse'

'A Tundra-Wolf Story'

Part Seven Crescent Cove "The WAR-HORSE"

Anthon could see the little tree covered island ahead. The fighting to get to it was so intense he could not take time to check if any of his men were wounded. The Roman soldiers standing in front of the island were much more disciplined, their lines much harder to break, even with the War-horses. Yet they were making headway, slow but sure.

From the back of Arkumus he slashed, chopped and crushed everything in front of him with his blood-sword, all the time concerned for Granit. The Tundra-wolves were behind the War-horses dispatching any wounded Romans they deemed a threat as the line moved forward. Anthon could feel through the bond Granit wanted to charge the island, no matter the cost. It was everything he could do to keep the big wolf at bay.

Anthon saw the enemy horse archers ride up to the island from the beach side and dismount with their bows. These men were not Romans he was told. Syrian auxilia they were called, men hoping to prove themselves in battle and by serving long enough to be rewarded with Roman citizenship. He was told these men were fearless warriors and very good with a bow. They were going to be a problem for his charge. With quick hand signals he ordered the archers on the hill and the Giants behind the shrubs to start sending arrows into the copse of trees on the beach. In seconds arrows flew over his head and the mournful whistle of incoming iron arrows came from the end of the cove. Anthon could not see what kind of battle was taking place at the end of the cove but he was thankful the Giants could still send their arrows. He was tempted for just a second to send in Wizard fire arrows to burn these Syrians out, but he did not want to contend with the flames when he got there.

The entrance to the cove was still a mass of flames and smoke. The smoke was blowing back up the little canyon hampering the ability of the Romans to put out the fire. The Mansers were still firing their crossbows from above and sending their darts down to kill and wound Roman soldiers. They were dying themselves from the Roman archers and slingers below, but the barricade was holding.

The iron arrows made terrifying screams as they fell down amongst the small grove of aspens. The enemy archers were already ducking arrow shots from the hill behind Anthon. When the iron arrows came down they shredded the little aspen grove, snapping trees and scattering leaves as they fell to the earth. Men were in impaled standing and crouching behind cover, most killed immediately or pinned in place. Only the most stout hearted of the Syrians stayed to send their arrows at the War-horses.

As the Syrian auxilia fired their arrows the first real casualties happened to the Wolf Pack Rangers. Anthon watched as one Ranger took an arrow to the throat, and he saw several get hit in their arms and legs. Wolves roared in anger when they felt the pain of their bond-mates. A War-horse went down with an arrow to the eye and more were hit in their unprotected legs. None of the Tundras were injured as they surged forward keeping low to the ground running through the legs of the War-horses. Anthon could hold Granit no longer. The big wolf and his pack-mates charged forward as Rangers and War-horses were wounded and killed.

The Rangers carrying horse bows began firing into the trees. More arrows came overhead from the hill behind as Mansers and men of the Thirteenth Wolf Pack let loose. Tundras now attacked the front lines as the War-horses knocked down the shield-wall to making openings for them. The fighting lines of the Romans in front of the little island started to collapse. Rangers on the backs of the fighting horses struck down in rage, the Romans did not stand a chance.

Legatus Lucius watched in horror as his centuries crumpled before him. His guards moved in closer and his Tribunes yelled at him to move off the island but Lucius was rooted in fear. He did not even draw his sword as he watched these monster horses and wolves come at him. This situation was beyond anything he had ever experienced, or even dreamed of. The men around him grimly pulled their swords and raised their shields in preparation of the enemy coming their way. Most could see their doom stalking towards them.

Anthon hand signaled the line of horses forward at a faster trot and in seconds they were on the the little berm of sand and riding in the tall grass. When the Roman line fell in front of the island the Tundras dropped back behind the War-horses, once again dispatching any threats in the rear. His light cavalry split off dividing themselves to ride around the island and attack the formations of Romans on the other side. The soldiers between the island and the surf were in disarray as fleeing Romans ran to them from the attack. Fear was setting in, especially when they saw the War-horses coming around from both sides of the island.

Anthon and Gilly rode up to the Roman officers with several other Rangers and a short battle of flashing swords ensued. Anthon quickly dispatched a Tribune and two of the guards protecting the young Roman General. A young Roman officer wearing the most ornate armor Anthon had ever seen sat his horse with no weapon drawn. Anthon struck him hard across the helm with the flat of his blade knocking him from his horse. The young man was hurt but still alive. The Over-Captain of the Rangers continued to move forward, not even looking back as the young General fell.

Legatus Lucius had the wind knocked out of him when he hit the ground. He looked around and watched as his Tribunes and guards fought and died hitting the ground around him. He looked over at his Legion laid out on the bloody sands between the island and the sea wall. That is when he saw the wolves, gigantic beasts with fearful gaping blood covered maws trotting towards him.

Lucius, who had never done a brave thing in his life, pulled his dagger from his belt as a huge gray wolf came towards him. If he had left the knife in his belt he probably would have lived, but the threat of his weapon caused the wolf to charge him. It brushed aside his feeble attempt to stab and bit down with the largest, whitest fangs Lucius had ever seen, taking his arm off at the elbow. The young Roman General could only see red as he screamed, so he never saw the wolf bite down on his throat and silence him for good. It was a clean death by wolf, much better than he deserved.

As Anthon rode across the little island he looked out over three Roman formations with their shields locked together and spear tips pointed out. The Rangers that made up his light cavalry were already attacking their flanks and causing the three squares to come together. Anthon looked over to the canyon entrance to make sure no reinforcements would be coming to help them. He saw the flames still burning hot and high. There would be no help coming from that way anytime soon.

Anthon signaled once again for an iron arrow strike, three volleys. Even with their heavy oak and bronze shields over their heads the arrows came piercing through, breaking the lines of men under them. As soon as the last wave of arrows came down Anthon signaled charge to all the Rangers that had lined up to his right and left. The most powerful horses in the world dug in with their three toed hooves and surged forward as if in a blood lust and crashed into the Roman lines. Anthon then whistled loud and clear and two hundred wolves followed bringing terror and death. In minutes three Roman Centuries were destroyed to a man.

Anthon rode back to the little island to get a better vantage point of the battlefield. He was followed by Gilly, two of his men and their Tundras. They went from one end of the island to the other to survey all areas of the Crescent Cove. Anthon had no idea what casualties his men had suffered, only the few that he had seen on the other side of the island earlier and the glimmers of feelings he could sense from Granit through the bond. He sadly knew from how chaotic the battle had become the numbers of his wounded and dead could only have grown.

He looked to the western end of the cove that held the entrance to the little canyon. The locals called it the Sea Snake Trail because of all its twists and turns as it led to the sea. There was one group of maybe fifty men who had formed themselves into a circle with their shields locked. What was left of their horse archers stood in the middle. Their position with the cliffs on one side and the sea on the other made it hard for his cavalry to get at them. He was afraid he would lose too many Rangers trying.

The Rangers before him between the island and the sea were forming up again under the directions of their Wolf Pack Captains. Some of them were assisting wounded men and animals on the beach while the Tundras were roaming in packs looking for any Romans that could still be a threat.

At the far eastern end of the cove remained the largest concentration of enemy soldiers. About two hundred were formed up in two defensive squares standing behind tall shields. They were deflecting arrows being fired at them from the forest on the hillside and fending off cavalry charges from two of his Wolf Packs. The Packs were doing light attacks as they probed their lines for any weak spots.

These warriors looked different from the other soldiers they had been fighting all morning. They were big shaggy men and carried a varied assortment of weapons, much different from the Romans they had already defeated. The fight was heating up as more Rangers rode over to join in. Anthon led Gilly and the others that way to get a closer look and to formulate a plan to finish them off.

As they made their way over to the far end of the little copse of trees, shouts went up and Rangers pointed to something happening from atop the hills to the south and west of them. It was an arrow shot high into the sky trailing a bright yellow tail of smoke. The arrow climbed to its peak and then exploded with a tremendous boom leaving a bright yellow cloud behind. Two more arrows followed that one into the sky in quick succession shaking the cove when they exploded leaving more bright yellow clouds for all to see. The yellow Wizard arrows were a warning to the Rangers in the cove that the Romans were coming in force along the road that ran along the cliffs and hilltops to the south. Anthon signaled to the archers in the trees to send green arrows into the sky. It was time to collect their wounded and dead and retreat from the cove.

The green Wizard arrows were the signal to let everyone fighting for the Wolf Nation know it was time to leave. At the farthest end of the cove barely visible empty wagons driven by Mansers were making their way to the sandy beach with an escort of Giants from the Sixteenth Tribe and a handful of Rangers from the Thirteenth Tribe. The Mansers on the cliff tops over the entrance to the cove also started to make their escape. The ones on the south side cliffs, the land side, came out of their make-shift caves carrying their wounded and dead. They started hiking the trails that led south and east through the forested hills. Wagons and stout mountain ponies were waiting for them at a predetermined place in the woods.

The Mansers on the narrow spur of limestone cliffs on the north side of the little canyon had a tougher time of it making their escape. That group was led by Boss Torben. They came up out of their caves and threw knotted ropes down the sea side of the cliffs. Boats that had been hidden amongst the rocks and boulders at the bottom waited for them. There was only one problem, Mansers did not swim and had a deadly fear of any water that went over their heads. Once the ropes were over the side a debate started as to either climbing down or staying and fighting to the death. It was a close call, if not for Boss Torben they

more than likely would have stayed. Most would rather die by the sword over a terrifying death by drowning.

Anthon rode about with Gilly giving orders to the other Wolf Pack Captains to pack it up. Assist the wounded and gather the dead for the wagons that were coming. They would not have time to load the bodies of the dead War-horses, so Anthon ordered that they be stripped of their armor and left. It was a difficult order for Anthon to give and saddened him and his Rangers greatly. The Wolf Packs treated their horses with the same ceremony and respect as they did any of their fallen warriors and Tundras. It was hard to leave them on the field of battle and not take them home to be buried with honors.

Gilly and Anthon rode the cove in silence except for giving out an occasional order. More Rangers, Tundras and War-horses had been killed and wounded than they had thought. It was turning into a very sad afternoon and it wasn't over yet.

"Where in the hell are the wagons?" Gilly asked looking down at the far end of the cove.

"What the.....?" Anthon said when he followed Gilly's gaze.

The Romans standing their ground at the far eastern end had moved their formations and were now blocking the road leading into the cove. They needed that road clear for the wagons to come in. At first what were just hit and run tactics by a couple of Wolf Packs to keep the Romans pinned down was now becoming a full fledged battle. One that Anthon and his men did not have time for with the enemy reinforcements on the way.

Anthon and Gilly made their way to the battle gathering Rangers as they rode. Tundras followed from all over the cove coming to the call of their bond-mates. The archers in the forest moved closer down the hill to try and get better shots at the enemy. As Anthon moved closer he could see the Giants coming down the road escorting the Manser wagons. They started attacking the rear of the Roman formations.

These enemy soldiers looked to be barbarians in Roman dress. Big, unkempt men carrying great swords, battle-ax and war-hammers. Most of them wore wolf pelts covering their shoulders setting them apart from the main force who wore the long red cloaks. They were fearless as they fought back against the Giants on one side and the Rangers on their War-horses from the other.

The Rangers, horses and wolves that had been attacking these men were furious and throwing care to the wind. Several of their Pack mates were laying dead or dying along with their War-horses and Tundras in front of the enemy shield wall.

"Everyone pull back, I want the light cavalry to the flanks, heavy cavalry assemble on me!" Anthon yelled out as he rode up.

Gilly and Shadow stepped in to help make sure the Over-Captain's orders were carried out. The Rangers and wolves that were there did not want to break away from the fight. They wanted revenge for their fallen comrades.

Rangers with horse bows started making passes at the flanks of the enemy formation. They rode in tight circles at the sides and sent their arrows in every time they rode close to the shield wall. The barbarian Romans were well protected but some arrows did manage to find their mark and men started dropping here and there.

Anthon formed his heavy cavalry into a line, thirty some Rangers wide and two deep. He rode in front of the men on Arkumus with a snarling Granit padding along at his side. The Over-Captain brandished his blood-sword and rose it high in the air and then brought it down pointing at the Roman line. With his shield on his left and sword in his right he turned his big War-horse towards the Romans and bellowed "*Charge!*" Seventy heavily armed and armored Wolf Pack Rangers on their mighty steeds with ferocious Tundras at their sides ran full tilt at the enemy line that was a hundred paces away.

The clash when the two forces met was heard all across the cove. The Tundras ran ahead first and jumped over the shield wall landing on enemy soldiers and tearing at any throats and limbs within their reach. The Romans had buried spears at an angle in the ground facing the Rangers to impale the horses as they charged. When the wolves jumped the shields many of the Romans lost their grips on the spears allowing the horses to brush right past them as they ran head long into the shield wall. The wall fell all along the charge and the front lines of the Romans became a boiling mass of horses, men and wolves.

With the Roman Centurions screaming in the background the Legionaries started to withdraw back to the corner of the cove off the road. They formed what was left of their two centuries into their orb formation to protect themselves from all sides. Any that ventured beyond their shields were struck down by arrows from the archers on the hill hiding in the woods and the horse archers still riding in swirling attacks from the other side. The wagons began rolling into the cove for the wounded and the dead.

Standing in the midst of all the carnage when the Romans retreated was a huge barbarian holding a bloody long sword in one hand and a notched, gore covered double bladed-ax in the other. Underneath his feet were the mutilated bodies of a War-horse, Tundra-wolf and their Ranger. The barbarian stood and faced the Wolf Pack Rangers and their wolves with a crazed bloody smile on his face, not retreating with his comrades.

Several Rangers and Tundras made passes at the blood covered warrior and were knocked away like a leaf in a wind storm. Some received wounds for their trouble and some were just battered aside. The man laughed like he was touched in the head with every attack.

Anthon rode up on the scene in a rage as he watched the barbarian step up on the dead War-horse below him and deliver a blow with his ax trying to sever the head from the body. The man sang in an unknown language and laughed as he struck. Anthon's anger was at a boiling point but it was a cold, calculating, deadly anger that he had under control. He

waved everyone off that wanted a piece of this monster, dismounted from Arkumus and walked towards him. Granit was at his side with his fangs bared and putting out a low rumbling growl not unlike the sound that the shaking of the earth makes.

The barbarian watched with crazed eyes as Anthon stalked towards him, bellowing like a mad man. His country men cheered for him from behind their shield wall as the man waved his sword and ax in the air towards Anthon, taunting him. Anthon had his anger under control but it was all he could do to keep Granit from running forward through the bond.

Then, in the blink of an eye and without warning, Anthon charged the barbarian. With Tundra-wolf infused strength and speed he was a blur as he ran directly at the man and passed within a hands width right by him. He kicked sand high into the air as he ran and when he was close to the man the clash of sword and ax could be heard as they struck Anthon's shield. Anthon's sword lashed out so fast when he passed by that it could not be seen by the human eye. The barbarian did not move after the Captain had run by, not turning to face his enemy. His countrymen still cheered in the background unable to see what the outcome of the brief encounter was. The Rangers sat on top of their horses in silence with their wolves beside them looking at the two men, also unsure.

But they only had to wait seconds to see what the quick exchange had brought. Anthon had stopped and turned slowly facing his opponent putting his back to the cheering Romans. The huge barbarian had not moved and was still facing the way the Captain had come from. The weapons he had been holding slowly slipped from his grasp just as the smile slipped off of his face. A red line across the over lapping bands of armor covering his stomach grew thicker as the Rangers watched. In seconds it was gushing blood as the man looked down at his stomach and then sank to his knees as his guts slid out. Anthon walked back to the man and with one quick swing took his head off at the shoulders, all cheering from the Roman line stopped.

Anthon looked down in sadness at the dead Ranger that had been at the Barbarian's feet. His name was Patel, a Wolf Pack Ranger of the First Tribe and the Alteran Province, one of his Rangers. His War-horse was SanDune and his bond-mate was called Swing Tail. They had been steadfast warriors of the Alteran Long Hall and judging by the amount of dead enemies around them had made a fine account of themselves before they fell. They would be sorely missed.

The Over-captain looked out over the cove. The canyon entrance to the cove was billowing with smoke as the Romans on the other side made headway at putting out the flames. It would not be long before they could send reinforcements into the cove. Close to the little canyon entrance stood about fifty Roman soldiers formed up in a circle protected by their shields. Wolf Pack Rangers and their Tundras rode around them keeping them from attacking.

All across the cove lay dead and dying Roman soldiers, a sea of red cloaks and blood. How many he did not know. But enough to make the Roman officers stand up and take notice that the land they were in would not roll over and be given to them. Even though the losses

to the Wolf Packs were far too many they were much less than what the Romans had suffered here. The battle was a victory, but at a terrible price.

Finally Anthon turned and looked to the barbarian Romans that had formed up in their orb, a circle formation with shield and spears facing out like their comrades at the other end of the cove. It was obviously the position the Centurions put their Legionaries in for a last stand. Manser and Wolf Pack archers took shots at the Romans from the trees on the hill when targets presented themselves. A line of twenty fierce Wolf Pack Giants on their huge three toed War-horses with snarling Saddle Backed Tundras at their sides awaited on the opposite side of the orb for the command to attack. And finally about a hundred Rangers on furious War-horses pawing at the sand faced off with their wolves. The Rangers could barely maintain control to keep from attacking the barbarian Romans. There were maybe one hundred and fifty of the Romans hiding behind their shields. It was to be their lucky day.

Gilly rode up to Anthon with his big Warhorse Arkumus in tow. "I know what you're going to say Anthon and it's okay," he yelled down above the noise of battle and surf. "We've accomplished what we set out to do. That Roman general is going to be none too happy when he sees this sea of red. Let's be gone from this place and live to fight another day."

"You are right Gilly, there has been enough blood spilled today. Let us collect our wounded and dead and leave this place," Anthon said as he looked towards the little canyon still choked with smoke and flames. "But I fear we must do so quickly. They'll be coming down the hill and through the canyon very soon I think."

Much to the disappointment of the Wolf Pack Captains, their Rangers and Tundra Wolves throughout the cove the fight was called off. Rangers on their Warhorses kept watch on the Romans who were still standing while wagons rolled in to collect the wounded and the dead. They worked quickly for yellow Wizard fire arrows were being sent into the sky all around the cove giving warning as Roman forces made their advance. Giant long archers along with about fifty Mansers moved to the western entrance of the cove firing arrows through the smoke to keep the Romans at bay. It did not take long for the wagons to finish their sad task and make their way out of the cove. Over a hundred mounted Wolf Pack Rangers along with their Tundras formed up as rear guard and followed the wagons out. The day was finally done.

With Gilly at his side Anthon watched as the wagons moved about the cove. Later he would find out the number of dead and wounded, on both sides, from Captains he tasked to gather that tally. For now he just wanted to be clear of this place and not lose any more men, wolves or horses. Everyone who came near claimed it as a victory over the Romans, but it did not feel that way to him.

Yet it had been a good day, all be it a sad one, as far as battle went. They now knew how the Roman war machine worked and what they were truly up against. It was a scary thing to behold, ruthless and unforgiving. Anthon felt a bit of fear creep up as he thought about the

hard fight to come. They had won this day, and but he was very worried about the days to come.

It was late in the afternoon when the General was at last able to ride into the cove. The fires barring entrance were finally defeated. He was aghast at what he saw. Over six hundred of his Legionaries dead, another four hundred wounded, and many of those would not make it through the night. He had no idea of the enemy losses as they took their dead with them when they retreated.

While watching from the sandy grass covered island in the middle of the cove as his men worked to help the wounded and collect the dead he came across the body of his Legatus who led this disaster. The young Gaius Lucius Italicus laid in the grass with a very surprised look on his face, a face which was tinged with just a slight bit of terror. The front of the boy's throat was gone, so far and so clean the General could see through to the spine, which was still intact. A horrible death to be sure, but at least he died quickly.

The General looked out to the sea thinking about what they were up against. They lost this battle today and the confidence he usually felt in his army was lacking. Fear was a feeling he rarely had, but he could feel it taking hold in a small part of him. He was becoming very concerned about the future of this war.