

'The Charge to Crescent Cove'

'A Tundra Wolf Story'

Part Six

After the initial surprise of the barricade erupting into flames Legatus Lucius diverted his attention back to the horses charging down the hill. He paid no heed to the frantic screams of the men underneath the bundles of wood blocking the entrance to the cove. He had not even ordered men to tear the barrier down so more soldiers could come into the cove if needed. The young General's only concern was giving these native barbarians a solid defeat by killing as many as possible. In his mind this would be an easy victory as the Roman Army did not lose.

The Centurions formed their Legionaries into cavalry repelling formations all along the six foot sea wall at the bottom of the hill. The men stood shoulder to shoulder and looked up trying to see the line of horses they could hear descending upon them through the trees. Lucius knew the horses would have to slow when they came to the short cliff. He ordered the front line of Legionaries to stand close to the sea wall behind their tall shields. The butts of their heavy spears were shoved in the sand and held at an angle pointing to the hill. He had the next four lines placed close behind the first with shields raised flat over their heads to protect from rolling rocks and throwing weapons. They held their long javelins ready to cast at the barbarian cavalry as they picked their way down. The several rows of soldiers after that stood in tight fighting lines behind their shields with spear and gladius, ready to advance or step in to replace fallen comrades. He could not tell how large a force of enemy cavalry they faced, and even if he knew it would not matter. There was no way the enemy could negotiate the cliff with six Centuries of Legionaries defending it. His men would slaughter them before any could make it to the beach. The fighting skills of the Romans were far superior to anything this rabble could put up.

Lucius watched as men he sent up the hill earlier came rolling back down. At first he thought the cowards fell in their haste to run from the enemy cavalry. When his Tribunes pointed out that many were pierced with arrows and gaping slash wounds the young General was unconcerned. He had no remorse for the dead Legionaries and counted the Century or two of soldiers he sent up the hill as acceptable losses. Through his leadership he would return those losses on these savages tenfold. Legatus Lucius looked back up to see the advancing line of the charging cavalry moving fast through the forest as they approached the bottom of the hill. Masked by dust and still under the deep shade of the trees he could see no detail of the enemy warriors or their mounts, they were just dark forms of horse and rider.

As the young General looked on his only thoughts were of the victory he would achieve here today. He looked across the sands at the formations of the Centuries with their standards spaced across the front lines. The square red banners hung down fluttering in the breeze with '*LEGIO V*' emblazoned over the image of a fighting elephant. He did not care for the mascot of the Fifth Legion and would have to have that changed in the near future, a snarling she-wolf was more to his liking.

Lucius looked around the grassy knoll and found the soldier bearing the Legion's Golden Eagle Standard known as the Aquila. The man holding it was called an Aquifer and his task to keep the Aquila safe was extremely important. The young General knew the tale of three Legions who lost their Aquilas after suffering a humiliating defeat in the forests of Germania north of the Rhine. Even though the Legates, Tribunes, Centurions and their Legionaries were overcome by a vicious betrayal of Germanic allies Lucius firmly believed the survivors deserved the stripping down they received as they were turned out in disgrace and left with nothing in the wild lands of Germania. In the young leader's mind there was no excuse for the weakness those men showed, they should have died alongside their fallen comrades. The last he heard Rome had amassed a large force of many Legions and attacked the Germanic barbarians in retaliation of their treachery. Brutal battles were being fought against the northern Germanic tribes, as much for the return of the lost Golden Eagles as they were to conquer the rebellious people.

The Aquila was a symbol for Roman power and an inspiration of strength to the Legionaries, and Lucius vowed to never join the ranks of the soldiers who lost theirs. The young Legatus would give anything to be leading a Legion against the Germanic barbarians under the watchful eyes of the emperor Augustus Caesar. He knew for certain under his leadership the lost Aquilas would be reclaimed as he put down the Germanic rabble. At times he daydreamed of the rewards he would receive from a grateful Caesar who could see his worth. Instead he was far away in these cold northern lands, far from the gaze of the Emperor. Hungry for power and fame Lucius planned and schemed other ways to draw Caesar's attention, other ways to receive the honors he so justly deserved.

The Golden Eagle sat with wings outstretched on top of the gilded pole for all to see. It was polished to a high sheen and was never far from the young General's side when out on the field of battle. The gleaming gold flashed brightly under the morning sun providing a beacon for the soldiers as to the location of the Legion's commanders. Lucius signaled the standard bearer to move his horse up alongside the small copse of trees on the little island facing the hill. He then ordered the man to be still while he took a moment to take in the sight of his Legionnaires spread out in formation across the cove in front of the Eagle Standard. There was no one he trusted but himself to pass on the images to the sculptors and artisans who would be carving the stone reliefs and painting the frescos of the battle here today. This was only the beginning of the victories he would have immortalized in stone and paint. They would decorate the walls of the Imperial Palace when he returned triumphant to Rome.

During his thoughts of grandeur and glory he did not hear, or chose not to, the cries of alarm from the Tribunes and his guards around him. He looked to the hill where they pointed, angry at the interruption. Lucius did not consider for a second why the horses of the charging barbarians were not slowing down as they broke out of the forest and descended on the bottom of the hill.

For Anthon and most of his Rangers the second red fire arrow came none too soon. The line of War-horses across the ridge of the hill were growing increasingly agitated with every passing minute. Soon Gilly was not the only one having a hard time trying to keep their big mount under control. As the mist cleared and the sounds of hundreds of enemy soldiers could be heard moving below the horses grew ever more eager to make the run. As the men began to see in more detail the long steep slope they would be charging down and the thick trunks of trees staggered throughout they grew ever more reluctant. Each Ranger had complete faith in their War-horse as a stout companion and warrior at their side, but never did they have to put so much trust in them on such a dangerous run. Soon the Rangers would let the reins slip through their fingers and lengthen to give over control to their mounts, allowing them to have their heads on the gallop down the hill. The men would be but passengers holding on tight to the swell, pommel or horn of their saddles. In the other gauntlet covered hand they would be holding the end of a thin strap of sturdy gossamar fabric. The strap encircled the chest of their horses and then came up to wind around the legs and waists of the Rangers holding them tight to their seats.

Anthon let out the shrill whistle to commence the charge. As one the Wolf Pack Rangers let out the reins holding their horses back. They grasped their saddles with strong hands and pulled on the gossamar strap the secured them to their seat. The line of eager steel-clad War-horses jumped from the top of the hill landing on the slope at a full run.

After the initial fear from the long leap off the top of the hill Anthon realized the gallop down through the forest was going much smoother than he could have ever imagined. He and the Rangers around him at first were rigid in their saddles but soon loosened up and began moving with the flow of their mount. Anthon could see the awe on each man's face as they sat spellbound watching their War-horse perform an intricate dance of dodging the thick trees and each other. It was truly an amazing feat and almost magical how nimble the huge, heavily armored horses were as they negotiated the steep descent. They moved faster than any would have thought possible, faster than an avalanche of boulders rolling down the hill.

Anthon could see he worried needlessly about the risk the thick layer of pine needles covering the forest floor posed to the fast moving War-horses. The slick glassy surface proved not to be the danger he thought it would as they made their run. Every step the heavy horses took with their huge three toed hooves cut through the slippery ground cover tearing into the damp earth below. Great rents were made in the ground as large clumps of

pine needles and clouds of dirt flew high into the air blanketing the hillside behind them as they made their charge.

At the beginning of the charge another of Anthon's fears, maybe his greatest one, was the War-horses would come out of the forest in a staggered line. The element of surprise on the Romans would be lost if they had to form up. Worst yet the attack could be disastrous for them if they did not all attack as one. As they came to the bottom of the hill he looked side to side through the thinning trees and could see those fears were unfounded. The big horses exploded out of the forest almost as one, each keeping pace with its neighbor.

With that concern put to bed Anthon focused on the next task in front of him. He and his Rangers all along the line crouched down on the broad backs of their mounts. Each gathered up the slack of the reins and prepared to take control of their horse, but they would not do it yet. Their steeds had gotten them through a truly harrowing ride without incident and the men would trust them to go the rest of the way to begin the attack. The War-horses ran fearlessly towards the sea-wall straight ahead. When they spied the enemy on the beach beyond they let out loud bellows of rage. To the surprise of their riders they picked up even more speed as they charged head long towards battle.

As the Over-Captain approached the Roman lines he had only a moment to confirm with his own eyes what the scouts of the Thirteenth told him with their hand signals. The enemy was unwittingly cooperating with his attack plan. Their formations stood close to the sea wall with shields and weapons facing the hill, at the ready to strike down horse and rider as they picked their way down the little cliff. To Anthon's surprise the lines of soldiers standing behind the first held their shields horizontal above their heads. The Romans were positioned to face a charge of regular cavalry and it was more than Anthon could have hoped for, there was nothing regular about the mounted force about to be unleashed upon them. He allowed a rare smile to grace the planes and angles of his face.

Seconds after they left the trees the line of fully armored and steel encased War-horses ran headlong towards the waiting Roman soldiers. Nothing on this earth could stop their charge now. They ran full gallop to the edge of the sea wall and with powerful legs launched themselves high into the air. The roar of the horses was deafening as they screamed in rage while they leapt. The enemy soldiers, to a man, stood stock-still and did not reacting at all to the charge. They were unable to comprehend the fact that huge horses, each carrying a mounted warrior, were flying over their heads.

The Romans held to their formations, one had to give them credit for being very well trained and disciplined. Their rectangle shields made a protective wall with more shields covering their heads, the whole line bristling with spears. However, their spears were facing the cliff, not pointing to the sky. They did not anticipate large bodies of horses landing on top of them. There was no time for them to make the transition now.

The steel under-armor each horse wore did its job well, protecting them from any serious injury as they came down on top of the enemy. The soldiers standing directly underneath the falling horses were not so fortunate. The mounts of the Wolf Pack Rangers weighed

well over a hundred and fifty stone and they fell on top of the Romans like boulders. Almost to a man those directly underneath died immediately, crushed under their thick shields of brass and oak. As soon as the big horses hit the ground they started stomping and kicking out in all directions. Any soldiers still standing in the immediate area were quickly taken out of the fight by powerful hooves.

Once the War-horses had settled down from the run and jump the Rangers let go of the gossamar straps they were holding in their shield arms. The straps fell free allowing them to move about their horse and bring their shields and weapons to bear.

Most of the Rangers preferred a medium round or kite shaped shield made of oak bound by iron straps. Some used buckler shields, small discs of iron they could move quickly about to block anything coming at them. A few just added more metal to their forearm vambrace guard for even more mobility. Whatever shield a Ranger carried they had spent hundreds of hours training and perfecting in its use.

The weapons each Ranger carried were much more varied than the shields they used. The one weapon they all carried was a blood-sword sheathed in a back scabbard where they could get to it with ease, and for most this was their weapon of choice. The blood-swords were razor sharp and able to cut through boiled leather, thin armor, muscle and bone as if going through paper. Each were made uniquely for a wolf-bonded Ranger by the Wizard and the master metal smith of their province. While the master smith folded the steel over and over as he worked the blade the blood of the warrior was infused into the metal by the Wizard wielding the Wild Wolf Magic. The swords were awesome weapons in the hands of the men that used them.

On the initial attack most Rangers had out their short swords. Easier to handle when on the back of a charging, bucking and kicking War-horse. Some Rangers preferred pointed throwing stars or small iron throwing knives perfectly balanced to take out targets at a distance. About every fourth Ranger carried a horse bow, much like the ones the Syrian scouts for the Romans carried. They were small bows made of bone and sinew laminated together that packed a powerful punch at close distance. Once the War-horses became more stable the Rangers started taking out longer range targets.

The most deadly were the Rangers that carried the slashing spears that had two foot double sided blades on the end of six foot oaken staffs. Others carried double bladed axes on four to six foot staffs. These men were masters at working these weapons from the backs of their big horses and with the reach the weapons gave them they slew foes all around breaking up the Roman lines just as much as the War-horses. Whatever weapon a Ranger carried he was more than an expert at it, with the strength and reflexes of a wolf through the wolf-bond and long hours of practice at the Wolf Pack Long Halls these men were a true danger to these Roman forces, it was only too bad there were not more of them.

Legatus Lucius watched as his front lines facing the small cliff were disintegrated almost to the man. No one would expect these huge monster horses to jump off the sea wall landing on top of his Legionaries with not a thought to their own safety. He had never seen horses so well trained nor so devastating in battle. He could see a few of the horses limping but so far not one had gone down nor had any riders been lost. All he could do was watch as his Tribunes and Centurions screamed orders to the men forming them up for a cavalry charge in front of his little island. He made sure his guards stayed close as he watched the battle unfold before him.

The General was off his horse and holding a round horse shield for protection from the darts being fired down from the cliffs. The pass was blocked for over a hundred paces with burning brush, branches and his Legionaries. Probably two hundred men had become trapped under the falling wood before the hell fires had consumed them. It was a horrible way to die.

He ordered the little stream running through the canyon dammed up so they could start throwing water on the fire. But he could tell the sun would be high in the sky before they would be able to cross to the cove. He could only imagine what was happening to the leading centuries of his First Legion on the other side of the fire.

He took one more look at the cliff tops far above and wondered again where his auxilia horsemen were. He had sent sixty men to each side to deal with the enemy on the cliffs but was yet to see them. He sent word for the Legion who followed to set up defensive squares and protect the supplies. He was starting to think this ambush may be more detailed than he first thought. His anger at lack of intelligence was starting to show as he snapped at men around him.

Anthon was relieved the initial charge was over. Any wrong move could have started a chain reaction that would have injured, or worse, killed any of the War-horses and Rangers running headlong down the hill. Fortunately every one of his Rangers made it to the sea wall without incident. Once the jump was made off the sea wall Anthon watched his lines form up on each side of him.

Only two horses were injured on the initial jump that Anthon could see. One from a Roman shield that wedged itself between the horses under armor and leg. The other was from a spear thrust to a War-horse's rear leg. Neither horse had been taken out of action as they charged deeper into the Roman lines causing disruption and chaos.

He heard the second wave of War-horses jump the sea wall to land and form up behind him. Any Romans still in the fight after the first wave were done for now. The War-horses, heavily armored and extremely angry, now moved forward towards the Roman lines before them in front of the little island.

Anthon looked at the wall of shields and the very disciplined men who stood behind them. They looked to be setup for a cavalry charge as before, but now it was on an even playing field. These would not be surprised like their comrades at the sea wall. That was until many of the men's faces contorted in terror as they watched almost two hundred of the largest wolves they had ever seen come running down the hill behind the horses. A moving wall of fur, claws and fangs in full battle mode flowed over the sea wall and ran up between the advancing horses to be at the sides of their bond-mates. The Roman lines which seemed so solid a moment ago looked to be wavering as the Rangers, wolves and War-horses marched forward.

Anthon started giving hand signals and the sounds of mournful whistling started to fill the cove. Iron arrows started to fall all along the Roman lines, in the aspens on the little island and on the men standing in formation on the other side of the island. The heavy arrows broke through shields and pierced armor with ease and there was virtually no defense against them.

He signaled and the line moved forward at a fast pace. The War-horses pushed the shields of the Romans aside as if walking through tall grass and the Rangers sitting atop them began hacking off hands and arms with precision. The War-horses started what their riders called a gentle crushing of the enemy before them. It was gentle because the Rangers had a smooth ride sitting on top of their mounts and were able to deliver punishing blow after punishing blow. The big horses were doing the same as they walked along knocking men down and then stepping on them with over two thousand pounds of weight. It was all very efficient in destroying the enemy lines.

From time to time a War-horse would rear up on the line as a spear or sword got through the horse's armor. But so far Anthon had not seen any horses go down or any riders fall. He tasted blood in his mouth even though there was not a drop. Granit was making sure none of the wounded Romans that appeared threatening would have the chance to hurt one of his pack. The big wolf was in his full fighting mode and everything was a threat.

All Captain Anthon could think as he swiveled in his saddle, knocking away spears, crushing helms and slashing hands and arms was just to let the War-horses do their job. Hold the line and keep everyone together and everyone should come out on the other side. The hard part was keeping those thoughts firmly in the minds the wolves. They were following behind Granit and their taste for blood was building with every crushing bite they put on a Roman throat.