

'The Rangers'

'A Tundra-Wolf Story'

Part Two 'The Rangers'

After donning his armor over his riding leathers Ando Gilgarhad walked out of his tent looking it over for any spots of rust. He had only just received it back from the camp handlers after they cleaned it and made minor repairs. He was pleased as the armor looked to be spot free. The only blemish he could find on the plain steel was the silhouette of a wolf's head over three chevrons etched into the breast plate over his heart. The chevrons denoted his rank and were almost worn away because of the turns of use his armor had seen. His rank stamped into the metal was no longer really necessary for people to know who he was. Nor did he need to wear the light blue and gray, the colors of the Alteran Province, in the dyed gossamar short cape hanging down his back, the colored strips of leather making up his apron or the dyed horse hair bristles in the crest of his helm for people to recognize him. He was known far and wide throughout the Sixteen Provinces. He was especially well known wherever strong drink was served and soldiers congregated in the main city taverns, the common rooms of the major Strongholds and every Wolf Pack Long Hall throughout the land. He was Sergeant Ando Gilgarhad, a Wolf Pack Ranger of the First Tribe in the Alteran Province, and everyone called him Gilly. For over the last thirty turns he has protected the Wolf Lands as a Ranger and he is very angry an enemy invasion force has landed on the western shores of the Wolf Nation and killed his friends.

He began walking through the camp which was a flurry of activity as men moved this way and that preparing for the early morning ride. Someone handed him a bowl of hot venison soup on the run spilling it all over his nice clean breastplate and burning his hands. It made Gilly even more angry as he looked around, but he decided it would do no good to start yelling orders at anyone yet. He could see everyone was working hard at getting ready to leave and moving as fast as they possibly could.

He walked over to the rope lines that made up the corral for the War-horses, deciding this was the safest place to eat without getting bumped into. Under the light of torches mounted high-up on tall poles evenly spaced about the field he watched groomsmen and horse handlers at work. They were trying to soothe the big War-horses so they could dress them in their armor. Some of the horses loved it while others couldn't stand it. He saw Garth and Seth inside the rope line going from one horse to another helping to calm them. These two young strapping lads were also from the Alteran Province and worked in the stables of the Wolf Pack Long Hall. Farm grown and tough as a stump the two were important figures

around the stables. However, talking to them was at times like trying to explain blue to a blind man. They weren't the most swift of mind, yet they were the smartest men in the room when it came to the War-horses, or any horse for that matter.

Gilly could see some of the horses were being dressed out in boiled leather and brass while the larger ones were having steel put on. For this raid on the Roman lines the Over-Captain wanted the horses armored over and under. That meant armor on the top and sides of their bodies from head to tail as well as armor protecting them underneath from groin to chest. Some of the really large ones would even be wearing sections of plate steel on their legs, however most would be covered in chain-mail on those parts. Two hundred War-horses would be suited up tonight and they had to be done by sunrise. That was when the Over-Captain wanted to ride to the ambush point. Thanks to the Maker they had the War-horses, Gilly thought. They were the only horses who could swiftly make the long ride to the ambush point while being fully armored and carrying an armored rider. These horses could do it at a full gallop if they had to and still be just as feisty and ready to fight as if they'd only walked a mile.

With his soup finished Gilly walked around the rope line to where his big horse, Tyrant, was kept. He began grabbing apples out of his bag as he went hoping he had enough to keep his War-horse happy. On his way around the rope line Shadow came sliding up beside him making Gilly jump. The big wolf was of the Solid Tundra Wolf Tribe and belonged to the Stone-Tree Clan. His fur was of the darkest gray, like the darkest part of a shadow, and his eyes were a greenish-yellow looking much like cat-eyes. There were times the Ranger thought the wolf was part cat when he watched him prowl stealthily across the ground moving quiet as a ghost. Gilly looked down at Shadow as they walked sensing the feeling of amusement at startling him coming from the wolf through the bond. Gilly never could figure out how his bond-mate could stay out of his head long enough to sneak up on him. Whenever he tried he could never manage blocking his thoughts and feelings towards the big wolf.

Tyrant was happy to see both of them, especially when Gilly started producing the apples. As he fed his big mount he noticed a wagon beside Tyrant holding the big horse's armor and saddle. He knew why, of course, the armor was in the wagon and not on his horse. No one liked having anything to do with Tyrant and no one wanted to risk injury trying to get him dressed. The big horse could be a monster and had a very bad temper at times. The black and gray mottled War-horse was the largest out of the two hundred and no groomsmen or handlers liked going near the beast. Gilly didn't even like being around him except to ride and give all his apples to. The horse was the devil, but he was also a warrior and a true terror when attacking an enemy.

To this day Gilly still thought Seth and Garth played a trick on him when it came to Tyrant. Yet if you asked them you got the idea they couldn't manage a trick. Over the turns many jests were pulled on the two and they all seemed to go right over their heads. He himself might have been guilty of one or a dozen, depending on who you asked, but it got to where it just wasn't fun anymore. When a prank was pulled on the two boys they took it in stride

and were just as nice as they could be. It always came back to him the time the boys were apologizing for the inconvenience after buckets of syrup were dumped on their heads. Gilly didn't understand it, someone as big as they were had no reason to be nice.

Gilly now knew the boys were a devious pair, and he was on to their wily ways, or at least he thought he was. Over a turn ago he asked the two to find him the biggest, strongest War-horse they could. It was time to put his old friend, Araches, out to pasture and to stud. War-horses were not like the Tundras who lived long lives because of the Wild Wolf Magic and stayed with their bond-mates for life. One never owned a War-horse, they stayed with you out of a devotion to the Wolf People and choice, their choice. You could get a good twenty to twenty-five turns of friendship out of a fighting War-horse. After that much time most became listless and dispirited and you knew they needed to go back to their lives. Some ran to the wild herds in their native homeland of the Tallspines, while others stayed in the pastures around the Long Halls. A War-horse in retirement was always treated with great respect and free to roam wherever they wanted to go.

So Gilly asked the two for a War-horse to put all others to shame, instead of asking the Stable Master as he should have. It seems Seth and Garth both quietly left the Long Hall the next day saying they were overdue to see their families in the Alteran Valley, a two day travel one way. Gilly did not think anything of it, no one did.

A week later the boys returned leading a young War-horse stallion who was huge for his age, and still growing. They called him Tyrant. Seth and Garth have the touch with all animals they come in contact with and the fiery stallion was no exception. For a while they were the only two able to saddle him, ride him and care for him. No one else could get close to the monster horse, nor did anyone want to. Finally, after a few weeks at the stables the horse began to calm. It was then the two boys came into the Long Hall and told Gilly that Tyrant was his. When Gilly accused the boys of pulling a prank, much to the mirth of every one else in the Hall, the two boys just looked at him having no idea what he was talking about. With straight faces they said, "Thisin' be the horse you asked for Sergeant Gilly. He's a real good horse sir, big and all, couldn't get any better!" As much as Gilly wanted, he couldn't be mad at the two, the War-horse was what he asked for.

It was another week after the boys told him the War-horse was his when the Stable Master came to him angrier than a bee in an upset bee hive. He told Gilly if he did not take control of Tyrant that day both he and the horse would have to leave. The man actually came to Gilly at dinner time. He yelled at him as he sat eating with many other Rangers, "*The thing is eating us out of the stable! He needs to be run, out in the Land, for months at a time! As far away from the Long Hall as possible!*" Gilly just laughed at the man until he saw he was dead serious. So, much to his aches and pains, and his sore fingers from getting bit giving out apples, he got to know Tyrant. His big wolf, Shadow, was a great help in keeping the peace between himself and the horse. War-horses and Tundra Wolves have a healthy respect for each other and seem to share a type of bond all their own.

So Gilly started taking off some of the armor he had so carefully put on in his tent. He rolled up the sleeves of his riding leathers as he ducked under the rope line and walked to the wagon. The big War-horse hated wearing the armor, but he looked magnificent in it once it was on. Gilly thought of the old stories told around the hearth as he went to work pulling the big horse's armor out from the wagon. He pictured the Battle-stallions, big beautiful horses his ancestors rode when the People lived on the other side of the Ironore Mountains. By all accounts they were strong, swift and did not bite when you were getting them dressed.

Captain Anthon looked across the field at Gilly as he slapped pieces of armor onto his unruly mount. A smile was on his face as watched the man working with his War-horse while Shadow lay off in the grass also he watching. The gray wolf was obviously enjoying the show judging by his tail wags. Anthon had known the rambunctious Gilly all of his life and it was good to see him humbled from time to time. Tyrant was about the only one who could really do that and judging by the way the horse was moving about it was going to be a very long night for the Sergeant.

Captain Anthon and Sergeant Gilly were cut from the same cloth. Both were big men over six feet tall, muscular, swift and strong. In other cultures they would be bordering on being Elders as they were over fifty winters old. It was the bond to their wolves allowing the Wild Wolf Magic to flow that kept the Rangers strong and hale. Anthon and Gilly had reached a point where the only indication of growing old was the gray in their hair, especially Gilly's. As long as their wolves and the magic stayed with them they would be protecting the Wolf Lands for a good long time to come.

Anthon looked out over the field with eyes of green and brown at all the War-horses preparing for battle and sent a silent prayer to the Maker that they all return. His eyes burned a bright green when he was in battle mode, brown with green flecks when he was calm. He wore his brown hair long, his black beard was speckled with gray. His sun darkened face was all plains and angles and hard for anyone to read unless of course his eyes were burning green.

His big Tundra, Granit, laid in the grass next to him. He was noisily cracking a large aurochs bone as he chewed on it to get the marrow. The big silver wolf could not get enough of them and they gave him the whitest fangs in the Wolf Pack. Granit was a Solid of the same Wolf Clan as Shadow. His silver top coat of fur was speckled with gray spots over a yellow undercoat. The wolf blended in perfectly when he lay amongst the granite rocks and boulders throughout the land. His golden eyes were molten fire and continually on watch as they looked out from under eyelids which always seemed half closed. The four inch fangs in his big muzzle could barely be seen when he kept his mouth closed, but when he snarled and curled his lips back he was a terror to behold. The big wolf stood up tall, going past Anthon's waist, as he came over to stand beside him. The Over-Captain of all the men and

animals here began scratching the wolf behind the ears and showering him with love through the bond as he looked out over the field.

Anthon was pleased with what he saw. Ten Wolf Packs were under his command and they were actually managing to work together getting ready for their largest attack yet on the Roman invaders. The Wolf Council and the Wolf King in all their wisdom made him Over-Captain of the Western Packs. He was to be in charge until the Wolf Lords of the Sixteen Provinces could stop their bickering and form up their armies under an Over-General. It didn't look to Anthon like that would happen anytime soon.

So far he was only ordering hit and run attacks by the individual Wolf Packs on the scouting elements of the Roman invaders. The sporadic attacks were successful, but they only caused minimal losses to the enemy and did nothing to stop their advance. In two mornings time the combined Wolf Packs were going to conduct their largest attack yet on the Roman army and hopefully give them their largest defeat. Anthon needed to learn how these Roman soldiers worked and there was no better way than battle. He also had to slow down their march into the heart of the Wolf Lands until their armies could be raised. Soon he would be leading his Rangers, Tundras and War-horses to a little place along the shore called Crescent Cove.

He walked through the camp answering questions and giving orders as he went. This battle would be much different than the ones fought against the Nordic and Svealand barbarians who attacked and raided the Wolf Lands every spring and summer. The barbarians were nowhere near as organized or as well trained as these men. These soldiers were also well equipped. Anthon's only hope was they were not as well led as they appeared. From what he learned of the Romans they were conquerors of most the known lands south of the Ironore Mountains. They were men who had been fighting a long time and a force to be reckoned with. They had the numbers and so far no interest in a parley of any sort.

Anthon passed by several groups of the Suthurne Manse, as they called themselves in their language. In the common tongue they were called Mansers (or Little Miners behind their backs, unless you were touched in the head or drunk). They were a special breed of man not standing more than four to five feet tall but wider at the shoulders than a man seven foot tall. They worked the mines of the Ironore Mountains hewing and digging out the ore and smelting it in their vast furnaces under ground. They produced ingots of high quality iron, steel and brass. Their raw metals were sought after by peoples all over the lands south of the Ironores.

The Suthurne Manse were steadfast friends of the Wolf People. Over two thousand turns past the People lived in the lands south of the Ironores at the base of the mountains. When a vast Germanic horde rose up intent on enslaving the People and taking their lands the Mansers came to their aid. With the help of the Southern Elves they guided the People over the Ironore Mountains to the new Land in the north. As the People moved through the high mountain passes the Mansers, who were highly skilled at moving earth and rock, brought down the mountain walls to keep the horde at bay. When they were done bringing down

the tons of earth and rock there was no longer a way to cross over the mountains. Only the Elves knew the secret trails and they were not talking, not even to their friends the Mansers. For five hundred turns the two peoples were cut off from each other until the Mansers finally tunneled through the vast rock and earth of the Ironores and opened a path to the Land. It was a grand reunion once the People and the Little Miners were joined again.

The Mansers were hairy men with thick curly locks on their heads which they let grow and grow. Their hair was wiry and grew out in long curls which the little men piled on top of their heads making a helm of sorts as tough as any leather. This helm of hair helped to protect their heads when working the mines. The Mansers also let their beards and mustaches grow long. Only those who were married kept their top lips shaved so their wives and children could see them smile, which they did a lot. Anthon heard the Manser wives were beautiful to behold and their children were bouncing balls of energy and joy, but he could only imagine as the families were rarely seen outside their secluded villages high in the Ironore Mountains.

As Anthon walked to the blacksmith huts at the edge of the field he could see every oven and forge was blazing as the Mansers made modifications to horse and man armor alike. The Little Miners were not much at fine metal work but they could rivet the hell out of a seam. The fine Metal Smiths were set up on the other side of these makeshift huts trying to stay out of the way of the Little Miners. The Smith's were working on the weapons that would be needed for the upcoming battle. None of these men were going to get any sleep tonight.

Anthon slowly walked to meet with the leader of the Little Miners. His name was Torben Herzog, Boss-man Torben Herzog was his proper title. Sent by his father Tobias Herzog, Torben brought two hundred and fifty of his Mansers from the Ironores to the call of the invasion. The Suthurne Manse traded with the Romans on the other side of the Ironores and had no love for their laws or their authority. They only stayed long enough in their outposts and towns to conduct business and leave. The Romans never attacked the Little Miners or tried to enslave them because they were so competent at bringing pure, strong iron from the earth. The Romans needed their iron badly to keep their grasp on the world.

Torben was not your typical Suthurne Manse, he was a brute and a bully. He was big for one of the Little Miners standing almost five and a half feet tall, and almost that as wide. He was considered a Boss just like his father and surrounded himself with henchmen whom he called his Foremen. Torben ran his crews with an iron fist in the mines of the Ironores and only the strict laws of the Manse on how to treat people kept him in line. So far Torben was following Anthon's orders with very little push back. Anthon was surprised at first but then he suspected it was only because his father would be joining them in the not too distant future. Tobias would be bringing many more Mansers as soon as they could become organized.

"Just received word the top of the limestone cliffs have been hollowed out and covered with the bundles of kindling and firewood as you ordered. It's done Captain," Torben said.

"Very good Boss Torben, how many Mansers can be hidden in the caves your men have made?" Anthon asked.

"All of them Captain. Make no mistake, we mean to be in this battle!" the Boss man said.

"As you will, as you will! Just make sure your men are ready to ride. They need to be in those caves by tomorrow night, sooner if possible," Captain Anthon said.

"They will be Captain, before the Romans arrive, and without them knowin'," Torben said. "We will show you what a determined group of the Suthurne Manse can do. We leave at midnight, my men will be ready." His men would be traveling on horseback and by wagon with the little Mongol horses as their beast of burden. For thousands of turns the Suthurne Manse have been capturing the wild horses on the Mongol Plain and breeding the sturdy little beasts to travel the mountain passes and the miles of underground roads in their mines. The little horses were not much larger than a pony or a donkey, the perfect size for the Mansers to ride. They also had more strength and greater stamina than a pony and a much more milder disposition than a donkey. The little horses could always be counted on to get the Little Miners where they needed to go.

"Very well Boss Torben, I'm counting on you," Anthon said as he left the Boss-man's tent. That went better than expected Anthon thought. He knew the Mansers were eager to prove themselves and Torben was no different. He wanted to look good for his father.

Anthon already knew how far along the miners were on their caves and if they were ready or not. He received a report earlier in the day from a secret weapon assigned to him, a pair of Little Fliers. Fortunately the thermal winds rose high and blew constant along the coast of the Gulf of Estland. This allowed the Fliers to stay aloft for long periods of time and go virtually unnoticed because they looked more like large eagles on the hunt they were so far up. With amazing eyesight, equal to that of any bird of prey, they spied upon those on the ground. They watched the movements of the Roman army and also kept track of the progress the Mansers were making. It was not the fact that Anthon did not trust the Mansers to get their part done, he just worried Boss Torben might exaggerate how far they've gotten. The Over-Captain used the Little Fliers to spy on all aspects of ambush he was undertaking against the Romans and kept their reports to himself and a few trusted confidants. Where possible he wasn't taking any chances with the safety of his Rangers.

Anthon next went over to the Wolf Pack Rangers of the Sixteenth Tribe. Giants, men that stood between ten and fourteen feet tall and made the War-horses seem like ponies when they were upon them. Almost two thousand turns ago the Sixteenth Tribe led by Clan Satneti was destroyed protecting the People as they fled the old Land from the Germanic hoard. When their ancestors settled this new land, what were now called the Wolf Lands, the People befriended the tribe of Giants living in the honeycomb of caves where the Ironore Mountains collided with the Tallspine Mountains. Turns later the Giants joined the Tribes and were pledged to take the name of the Sixteenth Tribe in the Galadhor Province. Anthon was going to check and make sure they were ready to travel with the Mansers.

He had two Wolf Packs that he would use as archers in the initial attack and then hang back as reserves to help with the wounded and to give cover for a retreat. The twenty Giants of the Sixteenth were the best men to have in a fight, but they excelled at archery. When they fired a volley of their four foot long iron arrows from their six to seven foot bows of yew they devastated a charging line. There were not too many shields thick enough or held by hands strong enough to withstand a falling barrage of iron.

The other Wolf Pack was of the Thirteenth Tribe of Barknormire Province. It was a poor Province that was mostly hilly forests, marshes and peat bogs, framed by the Ironores on one side and the open sea on the other. They mostly traded in wagon loads of peat from the marshes which they sold to the farmers and bog iron they mined for the smelters. The thirty Rangers of the Thirteenth rode Coursers instead of the much larger War-horses. The horses were light, fast and strong and much less expensive to feed and care for. The Rangers from Barknormire were fine archers and skilled swords-men. On their smaller swift mounts they made excellent scouts. Anthon was going to use them as Outriders for his force of Giants and Mansers. They would be lookouts and provide cover for the Little Miners as they concealed themselves in their caves. The Thirteenth would be leaving tonight ahead of the Mansers and the Rangers of the Sixteenth.

He was confident all was going to be ready for the ambush on the Romans. He put the thoughts of the upcoming battle out of his mind for a moment. With Granit at his side he walked back to the horse lines to check on his big War-horse Arkumus. The horse had a coat of spun silver that was now covered by plain steel armor. All that showed of him were his long black mane, black tail and black feathers flowing down over his steel covered hooves. Arkumus jumped and stutter stepped for the groomers making sure the armor did not pinch or ride on anything. He was excited, eager to go to battle against this foe he watched kill his friends and hang them from trees. Arkumus was almost driven mad with fury then. It was all Anthon and Granit could do to keep the big War-horse from attacking the Romans.

Anthon knew better than anyone how dangerous these Romans were and the threat they posed to the Wolf Nation. He and Gilly observed first hand their fighting skills and brutality on their way to visit the widow Chelsea Whitehone and her children at the village of Wolf's End. It was a promise they made to a comrade dying at the hands of roving barbarians, to check on the well being of his family from time to time. At first the visits were sporadic and only lasting a day or two. After a few visits Anthon and Gilly grew to love the quaint little seashore village of Wolf's End and the people who lived there. Many were retired Wolf Pack Rangers, their families and their Tundras. The two made it a yearly trip to check on the family of a fallen Ranger and spend a relaxing week of fishing and hunting.

This visit they rode up on the invasion taking place. It made him sick, the feeling of powerlessness they had, as he and Gilly watched their friends and Tundras being slaughtered. They both would be hanging from the trees now alongside their wolves and friends if they had charged in to help. Because of the sacrifice of a few retired Rangers, their

Tundras and their families, hundreds of villagers were able to escape Wolf's End. Anthon would make these Romans pay for the deaths of his friends.

He rode Arkumus out through the field with Granit running ahead to the edge of the high hills. They had made camp on the Tall Hills overlooking the sea. He watched as the bright quick-silver moonlight reflected off of the smooth waters down below. He looked down to the peaceful little fishing village of Dawnu and the road going by it, the road the Romans would soon be marching down. Anthon grew sad for moment knowing the villagers would soon have to leave their homes as the foreign invaders drew close. He knew this ambush they had carefully planned would be nothing more but an annoyance to this invading force, it would do nothing to stop their march inland.

He loved this land, loved these people and would do anything to protect them. Tomorrow he would be risking his life for these people, with hundreds of men who felt the same way. He looked out over the sea and gave the rest of the night to thoughts of his daughter Natalia, praying she was safe, wherever she may be.