

## ***'A Tundra-Wolf Story'***

### ***Prologue 'War-Horse'***

The mountain-horses roamed free in the foothills, the high meadows and the valleys all along the western side of the vast mountain range known as the Tallspines. Unlike their cousins below on the open plains the mountain-horses preferred the thick forested hills and steep inclines of the mountain passes.

Hundreds of thousands of turns ago the small three toed ancestors of the horse kept to the mountains and forests. But as the presence of predators increased and receding glaciers left wide open plains below the horses left the mountains. On the plains the threat of ambush grew much less, and they could run free of obstacles to escape. They shed their extra toes to just one hoof and their legs grew long making them much more fleet of foot.

One large herd of the small mountain-horses stayed behind in the forested heights of the Tallspines. They did not lose their toes like their cousins below, instead their middle toe grew large and hoofed with a smaller hoofed toe on each side. They grew large in size like their cousins below, but unlike them they did not run from stalking predators. Their courage grew and they almost completely lost their sense of flight. They stood their ground and fought with a fury that deterred all but the bravest and the hungriest of predators. They made the foothills and high mountain meadows their home. They climbed the cliffs as well as any wild mountain goat and could run and turn on a hairs breath through the thick forest paths. They were very agile for horses so large.

Even for their large size and their aggressive nature they were very shy of man. It was rare for man to venture into their valleys and meadows, but when they did the mountain-horses would watch from afar. If groups of men ventured into the mountains the herds would unite and chase them away.

They were friends to the Elves, the rare Pixens and the little Esari who lived in their Gossamar forests on the foothills of the Tallspines. The Elves called them the '*Nar Frannora*' and the Esari named them the '*Doralle Tylo*'. No one knew what the wee Pixens called them. The mountain-horses were never asked to be a beast of burden to these races, but only companions and friends to those living around the forests of the Tallspines.

That was until the People came to the Land and bonded with the Tundra Wolves, the bonding that let the Wild Wolf Magic free upon the world. Over the thousands of turns the mountain-horses were always wary of the Tundras and the two stayed apart with a healthy respect for one another. It was only when the Wolf Magic was let loose to aid in battling the deadly Druids Bane that the mountain-horses came to the call and joined with the Wolf People. Since that time the Mountain Horses became stout companions to the Wolf People, a force of nature in battle and in travel they could always count on. The Wolf People named them the War-Horse.

## ***Part One 'The Romans'***

Lines of Roman Legionaries marched along the tops of the limestone cliffs that snaked along a sea of calm waters. They walked in the cool early morning under clear sunny skies which gave the promise to hold for a pleasant day. The only blemish General Tiberius could see were the black storm clouds towering high in the far north on the other side of this inland sea. The clouds looked much too far away to be of any concern as of yet. But the weather could change at a moments notice in this northern hell-hole. One had to be continually vigilant.

Auguasti Tiberius Tarentius was the Supreme Commander of the invasion force sent by the Emperor Augustus to conquer these northern lands. To those he led he was simply known as 'the General'. It was what Julius Caesar called him during the twenty years he fought his wars in Gaul and Briton. After Caesar's wars the conquered countries were somewhat at peace and the General was finally going to lay down his sword and retire. Unfortunately it turned out that was not what the Gods had in mind for him.

Caesar was betrayed and slain when he returned to Rome. Rebellions broke out and Roman fought Roman for control. Gaius Octavias won out and became Rome's first Emperor and was given the title Augustus. Once the Emperor Augustus was firmly in charge he called on the General and asked him to do one more mission for the Empire. Tiberius could not refuse and took command of the force that was to conquer this northern land.

He hated this land, hated the cold wind that blew off the sea and was starting to hate the people that lived here. It was supposed to be a simple invasion. He landed five thousand men at night, in secrecy, to establish a beachhead and capture a quiet native village. A hundred of his men dead later and almost twice that many wounded had put him in a sour mood. The battle for the village had been against three old warriors, one man that must have been some kind of giant, three large wolves (he shuddered when he thought of the fangs on the beasts) and a handful of women and children. He had lost a hundred of some of his best soldiers, allied Germanic warriors, against these few natives. He wondered what would happen when he met a hundred of them.

He blamed the Legatus he had put in charge of this little landing. It should have gone off without a hitch but young Legatus Gaius Lucius Italics was inexperienced, headstrong and a fool. He was the son of a Senator, one of the most powerful in Rome, and the General had been forced to take him along on this mission. Until recently Lucius was a Centurion in command of a garrison on the northern border of Italia. A killer, not a fighter, he had commanded his section of the border with a cold and ruthless hand. His father was a close friend to the Emperor Augustus and had great influence. The Senator had many sons, all vying for power, so he could afford to lose a few.

In the end the General could only blame himself on how the battle played out. If he had not been swayed by the subtle political threats of the young man and the references to the Emperor he would have sent one of his more experienced Legatus. One that would have followed his commands to achieve his goals and not looking out for his own political gain.

The General would have to keep an eye on this one, even though he did not see the young Legatus surviving the invasion. The power that came with being promoted to a General and in command of his own Legion had gone to the young man's head. He was demanding to be assigned to every dangerous mission against these northern barbarians to help advance his own political career. The General had no doubt it would probably get him killed. It would be bad for the General to explain the young man's death to the Emperor and his father the Senator, but in the end he knew it would save some of the lives of his men.

Despite the losses of men the beachhead was established and he was able to land his Legions safely. Over fifty-thousand men were now on the beach, building a stout palisade around the village to help protect against any attacks by the native barbarians. He had brought seven of the finest battle-hardened Roman Legions and twenty cohorts of the best auxilia cavalry, archers and slingers he could talk the Emperor out of. He knew his fighting force was strong because he had fought with most of these men over the years with Caesar. He was now taking fifteen thousand men further inland, two Roman Legions and eight cohorts of auxilia, to establish another outpost from which to begin his full scale invasion of this land.

The General couldn't help but think the Emperor Augustus sent them on this invasion to shed a few Legions. He had an excess now after defeating Mark Antony and it looked as if the Empire's wars were over, at least for the time being. Rome's coffers could not support paying fifty Legions to be sitting around during a time of peace.

With that in mind the General vowed to himself to keep as many of his men alive as he could and still do his duty. Even though now it appeared as if this new land had rose up against them and promised to put up quite a fight. His advisors, the Druids that the Emperor had thrust upon him, told him the people were much like the barbarians in Gaul and Germania, the only difference being they rode upon unusually large horses and liked to fight with pet dogs. According to them the natives were unorganized and their tribes fought more amongst themselves than against an enemy. Yet the non-stop attacks against his Syrian horse archers and his mounted Germanic warriors told of a different story.

The scouts who survived these encounters told of monster horses kicking out with giant hooves, men in armor sitting upon their backs fighting like demons with long swords and giant wolves with fangs as long as knives attacking in killing frenzies. The story his scouts told of these native barbarians did not match what the 'Advisors' told him. They were nothing at all like the barbarians he was used to fighting. The General would be having a serious talk with these pagan Druids to find out the truth of what he was up against.

For the moment he had time to himself as he rode along the cliffs overlooking the water. It was nothing like home, nothing like the lands around his villa along the Ionian Sea in Italia. He dreamed of the warm breezes and riding the sandy shores with his wife Antonita, as his children played on the beach in front of his house. His villa was by the town of Tarentum where he grew olive trees and grapes. The olive oil he made was some of the purest in the land and his wine from the primitivo grapes was sought after all over the Mediterranean.

He closed his eyes and tried to imagine the warm breeze flowing over him instead of the cold wind of this foreign sea.

Of course his children were grown now and he had rarely been home for them when they were playing on the beach. Always away on campaign, first for Caesar and now for Augustus. He should have retired years ago and worked the villa he loved, but he loved the leading of men more and would probably do this until he could no longer ride a horse.

He was proud of his children and how well they have done despite his never being around. His oldest son Fadius was in the Praetorian Guard protecting the Emperor when he was in Rome. His second son Oppius was a student at Apollonia, a school of philosophy where the Emperor Augustus had studied. The General thought Oppius would be a student forever as the young man did not seem to know what he wanted to do with his life. That was good as far as he was concerned, it kept his son safe.

His daughter was the true wild one though. Flavia was the youngest and truly a free spirit. If she had been born a man he was sure she would be riding along side him right now. She was a master horse rider, loved archery and dabbled in sword fighting with the gladius when she could get away with it. She was also a master at directing workers on the farm. It was because of his daughter and his wife his villa was so successful. He wondered sometimes why he did things like this when he had them waiting for him at home.

"Legatus Auguasti Tiberius, Sir! Our front lines are marching close to this '*Crescent Cove*'. You asked to be informed, Sir!" the Centurion said.

"Yes, I did, Centurion Nigidius. Is Legatus Lucius at the front?" the General asked.

"He is General, he looks to be getting ready to ride out after the scouts," The Centurion said.

"Ride back and tell him to wait for me. He is not to ride into the cove until after I meet with him," the General said.

The Centurion quickly rode off to find the young Legatus Lucius. When the Centurion got there Lucius would know he reported directly to the General so even though he wouldn't like the order, he would obey it, at least for a time. The General knew he had to get there soon. The young Legatus would not wait long and move out on his own risking his men.

The road along the coast of this northern sea took a small turn inland and followed a stream bed down to the sea. Water had cut a wide path through the limestone cliffs over a millennia and now the native people used it as a road along the sea. It let out into a long cove, shaped like a crescent, that had a six foot sea wall all the way around its land side. Fairly steep hills climbed beyond the sea wall inland that were covered by a thick forest of pine trees. In the middle of the cove was a sandy island capped with tall wild grass and a copse of aspen trees. It was an excellent place for an ambush and he was afraid Legatus Lucius would walk right into it.

As the General rode past his Legionaries he noticed the cliffs on both side of the road. The way the water had cut the rock left a narrow piece of limestone cliff on the sea side that ended abruptly at the cove. It was a feature he was not told about. He hoped his cavalry had swept both sides of the cliff tops because an ambush could come from either. He made his way with his guardsmen and rode up on the young Legatus who was surrounded by his guards and Tribunes as they looked out on the cove.

"It is low tide Legatus Auguasti, a perfect time for me to march my Legion through. The sooner we go the better," the young General said snidely. He offered no greetings as the General rode up.

"What do the scouts say Legatus, have they returned yet?" the General asked.

"Nay, but we have been observing for a while and there is no sign of life. These barbarians will not attack a Legion on the march. They have not yet," the young Legatus said.

"Yes, not yet," the General said under his breath. "Wait for the scouts, make sure they check every inch of the cove. Any surprises as we march through will be on you!" the General turned his mount and rode back to the next Legion to talk with Legatus Romuelus, his long time friend. This kid needed watching.

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Lucius watched the General ride away. He had no respect for the man, or anyone else for that matter. He knew him and all the other Legatus' were trying to keep the glory of this invasion to themselves. That was why he had to argue and threaten for every important role. The beach invasion, the lead Legion, none of these would have been given to him if he had not fought for it. In time the rest of the Legatus' would see he should be in charge. The old General did not stand a chance. But not yet was he ready to make his move, there would be plenty of time for that later. After he performed a few more defeats of these savages.

Three of the five scouts sent into the cove were returning. He rode forward angry because the other two had not returned yet. He knew they were probably filling their water skins and enjoying the shade, while making him wait. These three returning scouts would find out who he was and they would tell him where their friends were. He rode forward with a wicked smile under his helm.

Before he could question the three men the other two scouts could be seen across the cove riding back to his position. Lucius was disappointed, but he would be sure to have a conversation with these two returning men later. It could prove to an interesting talk and he could use the diversion.

"Legatus Lucius!" the lead scout said as he rode up. He was a Syrian horse archer, some said the finest horsemen in the known world. To Lucius he was not Roman and not to be trusted.

"I do not like it," the scout said. "Too many places to hide, we should send more riders in to check the hills, my Liege."

Lucius rode a few feet into the cove and looked around. The hills to the north were high and steep coming down to the washed out berm alongside the cove. There was not much undergrowth so the field of view was open almost all the way to the top. Only the grass on the island and a small group of shrubs at the far end of the cove could hide men and those areas had been searched.

"Did you or your men see any tracks, horse or man?" Lucius asked.

"No, my Liege," the scout said. "But they could have covered their tracks, and high tide would have taken care of the rest. All we saw were wagon tracks on the road past the cove."

Lucius sat his horse a minute looking out over the cove. "Sergeant, have this man brought to my tent tonight," he said looking with his dead eyes at the scout. "I see no reason to keep the Legions waiting. Centurion, order the men to march into the cove!"

The young Legatus moved his horse to the side with his Tribunes and guards as the Legionaries started marching by. "As soon as more soldiers are in the cove I want to move to the island in the middle. We can watch the troops better from there and when the General comes up to thank me, he will be below me."

They watched as over five hundred Legionaries marched past them before the Legatus decided it was time to move. Their armor should not have been so bright and shiny that day, nor so much more ornate as the men on foot around them.

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Eyes from the tops of the cliffs and within the forested hillside watched as the Romans on horseback entered the cove. They knew these men no were leaders of the enemy army and in command of these marching men. The watchers were hoping the Roman officers would be stupid enough to move onto the field without all of their soldiers about them. A relay of hand signals were sent from one end of the cove to the other. A few men went into action to perform a task assigned by the Over-Captain.

The officers of the Roman army reached the little island in the center of the cove. As they rode up into the tall grass a fire arrow trailing bright red smoke shot up high into the sky from out of the bushes at the far end of the cove. The watchers were surprised by the lack of alarm coming from the enemy officers. They wondered why anyone would seem to ignore an obvious signal from an enemy force. They did not know the Army marching through the cove was led by a young, inexperienced General who had no idea what he was doing.