

'Crescent Cove, The Rangers'

'A Tundra-Wolf Story'

Part Four

It was just before the mid of night when the first wave of the Over-Captain's Rangers left the hills above Dawnu for Crescent Cove. The bright light of an almost full moon shown down on the men of the Thirteenth as their column rode two abreast into the forest south of the camp. The line of thirty Rangers rode by as silent as a whisper on their feisty, well trained Coursers who were eager to be on the move. The Tundras of the Thirteenth formed into several packs and were already running ahead as point guard for the line of men.

Anthon sat on the back of Arkumus with Granit alongside watching as the column of men rode by. Several other Wolf Pack Captains upon their War-horses with their Tundras at their side also came to watch the Rangers leave. Salutes of right fist to chest were given as Captain Larsinius, leader of the Thirteenth, and several of his officers went by. The men of the Thirteenth were leaving as outriders ahead of the Giants and the Suthurne Manse on the lookout for enemy scouting parties from the Roman invasion force.

By the light of the almost full moon shining down Anthon could see the beginning of the road the Rangers were taking into the thick forest. It was a little used trail they would travel upon and he was counting on the Romans being unaware of it. The road would take the Rangers south for a bit and then turn west leading them to the hill above Crescent Cove. Parts of the route were narrow and over grown with shrubs and ferns making it little more than a footpath in many places. Besides clearing the way of any Roman scouts the Rangers of the Thirteenth were also tasked with cutting back the foliage on their way to widen the road where needed for wagons that would soon follow. Unfortunately they would not be able to count on the bright light of the moon to aid them. After just a short distance into the forest the trees grew tall and close together, they crowded the path on both sides and blocked out the sky above. Even in the day with the sun straight overhead the trail through the forest was dark and gloomy. The Rangers would have to rely on their heightened senses of hearing and smell, courtesy of the Wild Wolf Magic through the Wolf-bond. Even in total darkness they would be able to feel their way and tell if any danger lurked on the road ahead. On a clear, calm night like this the Rangers were capable of sensing enemy soldiers as far as ten miles out with very little effort. With the added skills of their Tundras patrolling ahead there would be no surprises on the path in front of them.

Anthon was fortunate to have the Rangers from Barknormire Province as part of his combined Wolf Pack. As a leader Captain Larsinius was of the finest caliber and the men and Tundras of the Thirteenth Tribe who followed him were steadfast and highly capable

warriors. They could be counted on to efficiently accomplish the tasks he assigned them. They could also be counted on to protect the main force of his Rangers while the ambush was taking place, or die trying if they had to.

"Lars best make it through this in one piece!" Captain Makarios said softly, but loud enough for the line of Captains to hear. He led the Rangers of the Second Tribe from the Arvendon Province. "He owes me coin from playin' dice last night. I didn't stay up late taking it from him just so's he could skip out on his debt. He best not come up with the excuse of dying in this battle neither." The Men along the line laughed lightheartedly at the plight the Captain of the Second was in.

"Lars is a good man, probably the best of us," Captain Aleksis said, he was leader of the Rangers from the Sixth out of Gundor Province down south. "But he is terrible at dice, I think he owes all of us here coin. Have no fear Makarios, I don't think the Captain of the Thirteenth will fall just to get out of paying his debt to you. He just won't pay!" The Captains laughed a little louder and little longer this time, many agreeing with the Captain of the Sixth.

"All the men of the Thirteenth be good men," Captain Mihkel of the Eleventh from Saltwood Province said when the laughter died down. "I think it would be a good idea we say a quiet little prayer to the Maker asking they all come through this, that we all come through this, safely."

The Captains along the line watching the men of the Thirteenth ride by went silent. Some bowed their heads while others just closed their eyes, but all moved their lips as they whispered to the Maker for the safe return of all the men, wolves and horses going to battle. Anthon could not be more proud to be leading such men into the fight as he silently said his own prayer, another one of the many he had whispered through the night. The Tundra Wolves around them lifted their muzzles to the night's sky. In harmony they sang a low howl in reverence to their bond-mates saying their prayers. They were answered by howls from the wolves of the Thirteenth in the forest to the south and a chorus of howls from the many wolves still in the camp.

An hour after midnight the Giants of the Sixteenth and the men of the Suthurne Manse mounted up and rode out. Their journey would be straightforward and somewhat easy for all they had to do was follow in the footsteps of the Rangers of the Thirteenth. The Giants were spaced intermittently as flanking guards alongside the column of two hundred and fifty Mansers. Small groups of the Mansers rode upon their sturdy little Mongol horses, but most were loaded into their stout little well-worn wagons. For the Little Miners it was their preferred way to travel. The wagons were scarred and beaten from the many trips made up and down the mountain trails of the Ironores hauling ingots of iron and other metals for trade. Despite their rough appearance the Little Miners kept them well maintained and worries of any breaking down on the way to the Cove were low.

Sitting amongst the men in the wagons were small piles of what looked to be rusty battered scrap metal. The bundles of metal were far from scrap however, they were actually armor

the Mansers would be wearing into battle. The Little Miners had little to no interest in the ways of the warrior, even though many from the lands south of the Ironores have tried to pillage the halls of their mines, and there would undoubtedly be many more to come. Rumors have always circulated that the Suthurne Manse had rooms filled with an enormous horde of precious metals and gems. To some extent the speculations of this vast treasure were true. The Mansers have no use for metals such as silver and gold nor any of the gemstones they come across. They treat these much like waste materials when they find them as they dig and hew through the stone for the iron ore they hold so dear. However, the Little Miners are not totally oblivious to the value of these metals and precious stones. When veins of these materials are discovered they are hewn from the stone and dumped in mined-out caverns instead of on the mountainside with the rest of the mine tailings. Over the turns ton upon ton of these unprocessed metals and gems have accumulated in many chambers throughout the maze of tunnels the Little Miners have dug.

Throughout the turns many a band of barbarian raiders and marauders have come looking to take this fabled treasure, and so far all have failed. No matter how large the party, nor how well armored and armed they were, very few have been able to beat the defenses the Mansers have put in place along the path leading to their mines. Carefully and expertly constructed along the miles of twisting and turning road are hundreds of hidden deadfalls, boobytraps and covered pitfalls that only the Mansers can navigate safely. The few who made it through the deadly road to the openings of the mines died when they ran into a hail of crossbow bolts shot from carefully concealed murder holes. In the stone of the walls leading into the mines wide passageways were hewn going several levels up in which the Little Miners could move freely about and shoot through the numerous carved holes. So well have these defenses worked for the last several thousands of turns the Suthurne Manse have all but given up hand to hand battle skills and the weapons and armor that go along with it.

When the Mansers did have need of armor over a thousand turns ago it did not look much better than what the Rangers could see in the wagons traveling by now. It was very rare for a Little Miner to have a quality suit of armor, for there were few fine Metal Smiths with the skill to do so. The great majority of the Mansers have very little desire, or patience, to do fine work of any kind. When they do have need of armor their Blacksmiths will roughly beat plate iron into shape and crudely rivet it along the seams and where straps are needed. When the armor was finished it looked as if it were the survivor of many terrible battles, before it was even worn. Most of the armor and their favorite weapons such as the battle-axe and the war-hammer have been around for generations and passed down over the turns from old to young. Usually they only see the light of day a few times during a turn, at festivals when the melees are held. At those events no one cares what the armor looks like, only that it is functional and protects the man wearing it.

Anthon sat once again upon Arkumus at the side of the trail watching the lead elements of the Giants and Little Miners ride by. Lining up alongside him were more Wolf Pack Captains this time showing respect for those going into danger. As one they saluted with right fist to chest as Captain Trowarz, commander of the Sixteenth, and Bossman Torben rode by. The

Giant was on his War-horse Caladite, a huge mare with a beautiful chestnut coat. Torben rode next to him on a small horse from the Mongol plains. Anthon hid a smile as he watched the leaders of this small force ride by. Trowarz was a very tall Giant and he made the massive War-horse he sat upon seem but a pony. Boss Torben was considered large amongst his folk, but even so the small Mongol horse he sat looked to be one of the large, grand Battle-stallions of old under him.

One of the Captains gave a low whistle and said, "I wouldn't mind going into battle with some of those furry beasts at my side!" He was referring to the large pack of Saddleback Tundra Wolves running by.

"Be glad if you don't see any of those on the battlefield," another Captain said. "The Saddlebacks will be with the Giants who be covering our backs with those big bows of theirs. If any of those wolves join us on the field it means we be in dire straights for sure!"

The Tundra Wolves of the Sixteenth were some of the biggest wolves Anthon had ever seen as he watched the pack run by. He would hate to be an enemy having to face them. The bond-mates of the Giants were of the Saddleback Tundra Wolf Tribe and the largest of the Tundra-wolves. The wolves varied in color but all had the distinctive patch of dark fur on their back and sides forming the shape of a saddle. These wolves were far from their home which lay along the rocky shores of the Northern Sea at the far western end of the Tundra plain, or as the wolves thought it, 'the Wolfs Wood'. From their caves in the Galadhor Province it took the Giants several months of hard travel to reach the bonding grounds of the Saddlebacks and several months to travel back. A long time to be gone from home, especially if you were a young Giant who did not bond with a wolf.

Neither Anthon, nor any of the Captains here, had ever gone to battle with the Giants at their side. They were a peaceful race and very few stories were told of them becoming angry enough to go to war. When they did join a fight it was usually resolved quickly when an enemy saw them on the field arranged against them. The tale of what happened at Wolf's End to one of their own angered the Giants of the Wolf Pack Rangers enough to set aside their peaceful ways. It remained to be seen if an army would be formed against the Roman threat from the Province of Galadhor, but the Wolf Pack Rangers of the Sixteenth had no qualms about joining the fight. The Giant Vlazut and his bond-mate Waverun, who were killed at Wolf's End, were retired from the Rangers of the Sixteenth. Vlazut had decided to spend his remaining turns above ground instead of in the caves of his homeland and both he and his Saddleback had a great love for the sea. Their death at the hands of the Romans and the defilement of their bodies being hung from a tree angered their Ranger Pack-mates and spurred their desire for revenge.

The Giants rode out with the long hilt of a blood-sword sticking up from behind a shoulder and each carrying a tall, thick bow of yew. Two quivers full of four foot long arrows were also strapped to their backs. One was filled with finely made arrows of oak-wood shaft fletched with the feathers of a Red Wing Hawk on one end and a heavy iron broad-head on the other. The other quiver held arrows made of iron. The shafts of these arrows were a

hollow tube of rolled iron also fletched with the strong rigid feathers of the Red Wings on one end and a heavy iron arrowhead forged to the other. The way the iron arrows were constructed caused them to make a loud mournful wail when they came down from the sky or zipped across the battlefield instilling fear to all. The hollow tubes could also be packed with powdered Wolf Wizard-fire. When the iron arrows hit their target they were designed to spark no matter what they struck. When packed with the volatile powder they exploded into a ball of flame sending out jagged metal bits of iron. The Giant warriors were the only ones able to draw back the great bows of yew and launch the heavy iron arrows hard, fast and high. As Anthon watched the Giants of the Galadhor Province ride by he thought what a devastating weapon they will be against the enemy. He pitied the Romans who would have to stand against the power and force of their iron arrows.

Anthon's battle-plan hinged on the Mansers making it to the caves they made in the cliff tops, before the Roman invasion force arrived. Most importantly they needed to get in them undetected by the Romans. They were the force that would split off and isolate a contingent of the invading army so they could be cut down and destroyed. Two hundred of the Mansers were to be concealed in the cliff tops with their crossbows. The other fifty would be with the Rangers of the Thirteenth and the Sixteenth and waiting in wagons close to the battlefield in case they were needed for the wounded. Boss Torben promised to handpick a dozen of his best archers to hide in the forest on the hill above the Cove with Rangers of the Thirteenth. Anthon had faith the Mansers would do their part when the time came. They had been staunch allies to the Wolf People for a long time and were good men to have in a fight. The best part of the plan was Boss Torben leaving with his men making Anthon's life just a wee bit easier.

Before sunrise the next morning Anthon walked down the rows of armored and saddled War-horses eager to be heading out. He led seven Wolf Pack Captains from the other Provinces and their Sergeants on an informal inspection of the horses. The torches above burned brightly over the two hundred plus War-horses who were standing with their riders next to them. Panting Tundra-wolves laid about in the grass close to their bond-mates amongst the rows as eager as the horses to be on the move. Groomsmen and handlers stood off to the side ready to do the Captain's bidding should anything need doing. Gilly walked by his side with his armor back on after spending most of the night getting armor on Tyrant. He was bone tired but ready to ride. Granit padded along on Anthon's other side, tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth as he panted in the cool morning air.

Anthon combined the Wolf Packs and split them into two groups of just under a hundred each. One group he called his *heavy* cavalry, the other his *light*. The War-horses of the *heavy* cavalry wore armor made of steel covering them over and under and from nose to tail. The steel chamfrons, which were part of all the horses's armor, covered and protected their face. Some of these sprouted a single spike from the forehead giving them the look of a huge unicorn, others had many spikes protruding along the large plate of steel making them look like monsters. The next well crafted piece of steel on the horses was the crinet. This covered their necks in lobster-like segmented plates allowing them to move their heads freely about. The steel crupper went around and protected the hind quarters. The

flanchards attached to the saddle on each side to protect the flanks and they attached to the heavy steel peytral which protected the horses chest. The last piece of armor to be attached was the under plate, another heavy piece of steel that conformed to and protected the lower chest, belly and groin. Many of the horses had their reins and legs wrapped in chainmail for even more protection. Needless to say the largest and strongest of the War-horses wore this armor for it was incredibly heavy, even more so once you added an armored rider and his weapons. These horses were up to the task and could gallop for days carrying this load before tiring.

The barding covering the horses of the *light* cavalry was made of a much lighter material. Instead of steel most of their armor was made from boiled leather reinforced with bronze plates and chainmail. The boiled auroch's hide was stiff and covered in beeswax making it very tough. The thick leather offered good protection especially were it was reinforced with bronze plates riveted in. The horses of the light cavalry also did not wear the under plate of armor making their load so much lighter. This allowed them better maneuverability and to be a quick reaction force on the battlefield. The only thing that was the same for the horses of the heavy and light cavalry were their riders, all Rangers wore the same armor no matter how their War-horses were barded.

The armor the Rangers wore over their tall leather riding boots and riding leathers was just plain, unadorned Manser steel. It was finely made with no decoration or embossing on the metal except over the heart. Captain Anthon looked over the armor the Rangers wore just as much as he did the War-horses as he went down the line. Steel greaves fit over their boots and covered their shins up to just above their knees. They almost met the boiled aurochs leather and steel tassets that hung like a skirt from the bottom of the cuirass protecting the Ranger's hips, groin and buttocks. The cuirass, the steel breastplate and backplate, sandwiched over the torso being held together by thick leather straps and buckles along the sides and on top of the shoulders. Steel pauldrons covered the shoulders, a gorget of steel plate protected the throat and steel vambraces protected the forearms.

Each Ranger carried steel backed leather gauntlets and held a steel helm with a high horsehair crest running down the middle that was dyed in the colors of their Province. A plume of long horse hair hung down from the back of the crests on the helms. The plumes on the Captains helms were dyed a bright red, the Lieutenants a bright orange and the plumes on the Sergeants helms were both colors. It was a tradition going back to when the Wolf Packs were formed that the leaders wear these bright colors. These men led from the front and the warriors who followed could always find them on the field of battle. Built into the helms was a piece of metal that acted as visor to shield from the sun when up and dropped down to become a face guard during battle. The warriors also wore half cloaks made of fine gossamar cloth also bearing the colors of their Province. The Rangers were swift and strong in their armor and could have worn it twice as heavy due to the strength gained from the wolf-bond and the Wild Wolf Magic.

Every Ranger carried a longsword resting in a scabbard built into the backplate of their armor. They were named blood-swords and all who were the bonded companion of a

Tundra Wolf carried one. When a person of the Wolf Lands became bonded to a Tundra they gave a flask of their blood to the Wolf Wizard of their Province. The Wizard then worked with a master metal smith to forge a steel longsword infused with the bonded persons blood. The swords were plain, not ornate at all, but had an edge along both sides of the blade that never dulled. The swords were deadly sharp against an enemy but would not cut the bearer or a friend. The Manser steel the sword was made from was strengthened by the spells of the Wolf Wizard and the blood of the bonded and could not be bent or broken.

The only adornment the Rangers wore on their armor was an engraving on the breastplate placed over the heart. The regular Rangers, the backbone of the Packs, had a single chevron with the silhouette of a wolf's head engraved into the steel. Sergeants wore three chevrons under the wolf's head stamped into the metal. Lieutenants wore a thick bottom chevron with a thin chevron above, both under the wolf head. A Captain's rank was designated by two thick chevrons under the wolf head silhouette.

Captain Anthon was pleased with what he saw as he came to the end of the fourth row of warriors and the War-horses. He had gone through rapping on metal and tugging on straps and found very little that had to be taken care of. The Wolf Packs were ready to mount up. Eight wagons were hitched up and loaded with supplies and weapons behind the rows of horses. The groomsmen and horse handlers would load up into these wagons when it was time and follow the eight Wolf Packs as they headed for Crescent Cove. They would follow at a distance and set up a temporary camp once they were close to the Cove.

The sun was lighting up the sky behind the Tallspines when Anthon gave the signal to mount up, it was time to ride out. It had been five hundred turns since this many Wolf Packs came together to fight a common enemy. In the past the Packs united and joined with the armies of the Wolf Nation to beat back the Mongol Horde invading over the passes of the Tallspines. The Wolf Lands were a much more dangerous place back then with constant threats from barbarians, pirate raiders and the Mongols. Each Province of the Wolf Nation kept larger contingents of Wolf Pack Rangers and their bond-mates to patrol their borders and protect the people. Wolf Packs as large as two hundred Rangers were not uncommon in some of the Provinces back in those days.

After the Mongol Wars a peace of sorts reigned over the Provinces of the Wolf Nation. There were still threats and the borders still needed to be patrolled but over the next five hundred turns the Wolf Packs were reduced greatly in size. Now the average Pack size was twenty-five to fifty Rangers, each with a companion bonded Tundra-wolf. One could not be a Ranger unless a wolf had chosen you as a bond mate. Bonded soldiers from the castles, strongholds and keeps also patrolled the Wolf Lands and aided the Wolf Packs if the need arose, usually around spring and summer when the barbarians and raiders were able to move about after the winters freeze.

Captain Anthon and Sergeant Gilly commanded thirty Rangers from the Alteran Wolf Pack Long Hall. Twenty-five of them were on the field today while five stayed back at the Hall. It was the beginning of spring so soldiers from the Alteran Stronghold were helping to fill in

the gaps. So far there were no signs of any barbarian or pirate raiding parties along the coast lands since the thawing of the fjords in the northern lands where they lived. Stranger yet was not even the Little Fliers nor the Sea Lords had caught sight of their dreaded Dragonships out upon the high seas. It was a bit unsettling as you could usually count on raids upon the Wolf Lands by now. It was a mystery that Anthon did not have the time to worry about.

With the inspection out of the way Anthon went to Arkumus and climbed up on the big War-horse. Arkumus was ready to go as he pranced around excited to be moving, Granit was sounding out low howls at the horse as he moved here and there, trying to stay out from under the big hooves. Anthon could tell through the bond that Granit was also excited to be leaving the camp.

Anthon looked up at the early morning sky as men started to ride out of the lines. Rangers of the Second Tribe were taking the Outrider position for the second wave of the ambush. Under the direction of Captain Makarios they were riding out in pairs, each taking a different trail as they rode point for the main Pack. This was their land and these men with their bond-mates knew it well. They made the perfect scouts as they were very familiar with the coastline and the trails of the inland forest on the way to Crescent Cove.

As Anthon scanned the sky he saw dots high up in the air that looked to be hawks flying in a kettle. He counted eleven specks soaring around each other in circles in the sky. He could barely tell the difference from the four Little Fliers and the seven large Red Wing Hawks as they were so high up in the sky. He knew the Romans would never know they were being watched by these little dots, unless someone were to tell them of course.

Once again he looked to the north. He could see the far away black blur going high in the sky telling him there is a huge storm brewing. As he awaited the return of a scout to give the all clear to ride out he thought of his daughter so far away. He gave another silent prayer, one more of the many, that all was well.

It is the time of year for the bonding when children who have just come of age travel to the WolfsWood and to the bonding grounds of the Tundras. Natalia has just turned sixteen springs and has finished her learning at the Houses of Lore. She should be finished with her journey to the same bonding grounds he went to as a youngblood many turns ago when he bonded with Granit. By now she should be home, and hopefully getting to know her Wolf.

He knows she is in good hands, having made the journey to the Wolfs Wood with experienced Bond Masters and a group of youngbloods like herself. Plus she is tough, smart and skilled in the use of many weapons from turns of training on the Battle Grounds. She has been a little fighter ever since she could walk, but as is with any father still he worries. He wished more than anything he could have made the journey with her, as they had planned so long ago. He hoped more than anything her journey to the Wolfs Wood was fruitful and a wolf had picked her.

There were times when his duty to the Wolf Lands was a heavy burden to bear, as it was for many of the men here. He rode out with the thought these Roman invaders would pay for the attack on his homeland, and for keeping him away from his daughter who he loved so much
