

# 'Prerequisite to an Ambush'

## *'A Tundra-Wolf Story'*

### *Part Five*

The evening air was crystal clear giving Anthon a breathtaking view of the vast swath of brightly shining stars held in the inky blackness of the night sky. He looked out to the East over forest covered hills that seemed to march on forever into the distance. The dim lighting from the stars above set the top of the forest canopy aglow in a soft grey light while patches of pitch black peeked out all throughout the undersides. Anthon waited on the rise of the Full Moon, the moon the Wolf Witches called the Flower Moon at this time of the turn. He wanted its cold white light to aid in his ride to the hill above Crescent Cove.

Anthon was dismayed when the moon finally showed. Instead of seeing a bright white light peeking through on the horizon he watched as a dull ruddy-red glow came into view. A Full Blood Moon was rising into the night sky. It was a bad omen for sure, and there had been far too many of them this turn. As the moon came up over the trees it gave barely enough light to aid the camp handlers as they unloaded wagons and set up tents for the temporary camp. Anthon was hopeful the Blood Moon would not affect the sleep the War-horses, Rangers and Tundra Wolves needed to get tonight. The Over-Captain wanted them rested and ready to ride in the early morning when they moved to the horse lines above Crescent Cove a mile away.

As Anthon walked through the camp he noticed the men were quiet, their usual banter around the campfire while they ate was very subdued. They did not even bring out their lutes and other instruments to play after the meal. As the Blood Moon rose he could see it weighed heavy on everyone. He knew they would sleep with one eye open and stay in groups watching each other. Demons were let loose on the world during a Full Blood Moon and they roamed the earth trying to possess some poor soul. Anthon said a prayer to the Maker asking that his men not be visited tonight. It would be a terrible omen towards tomorrow's battle.

The Tundras left when darkness fell. They barked and howled as they ran through the forest and into the wild lands beyond. The Full Moon brought out the hunt in them and the Blood Moon intensified their primal instincts while bringing them closer to their fathers, fathers' memories. Fortunately the Wild Wolf Magic within each of the big wolves protected them from the evil let loose under the ruddy-red glare. However, their smaller cousins the Gray Wolves and the mangy Grim Wolves were not immune to the demons touch. Fortunately the Gray Wolves still remained shy of man even when possessed, and especially if Tundras were about. The cowardly Grim Wolves, who were already filled with

enough evil, became emboldened under a Blood Moon, even more so if a demon took hold. Thank the Maker the black devils lived in the Snow Forest far away to the north.

Anthon sent thanks through the bond to Granit for leading the Tundras southward, away from the Roman army. Given their hatred for the enemy soldiers it would not do for the packs to hunt anywhere near their lines. Anthon knew the Romans were aware of the big wolves and that they fought for the defense of the Wolf Lands. If they saw packs of them running about it could put them on alert and lessen his chance of a surprise ambush. However, Anthon had little concern if enemy scouts heard the barks and howls of the big wolves off in the forest. The voices of the Tundras were no different from those of any other wolf as they mingled with the night noises of the wild forest.

As Over-Captain Anthon needed to ensure with his own eyes nothing had changed on the hilltop above Crescent Cove. Under the dim red light he rode Arkumus to the place from which the attack on the Romans would begin. A small group of Wolf Pack Captains trailed behind to lend eyes making sure everything was ready for tomorrow. They made little sound as their horses walked on a thick bed of pine needles carpeting the forest floor. All weapons and armor were tied down and padded with gossamar cloth so there was no clanging of metal on metal. All that could be heard coming from the line of Rangers was the crunching of pine needles as their mounts walked the trail. The Rangers were not alarmed by the noise the horses made because it blended in perfectly with the sounds of the surf below and those of the forest at night.

Anthon stopped as his Captains lined up on each side to look down the tall hillside they would be charging tomorrow. He could hear sharp intakes of breath and subdued exclamations from the men as most got their first view of the steep hill. Under the moonlight it looked to be a much sharper decline than he remembered. It would be the most dangerous charge he or any of his Rangers had ever attempted on the back of a running War-Horse. There was little ground cover to get in the way, just a forest of thick pine trees with a heavy layer of pine needles covering the ground. Anthon knew the run down the sharp-angled slope on slippery pine needles was not the only danger they had to contend with. The horses would have to avoid the wide trunks of the very old pines growing tall and straight throughout the hillside. Fortunately there were very few low hanging branches around the base of the trunks, most were high and out of the way in their quest for sunshine. Anthon hoped the trees were spaced far enough apart because their mounts would also have to look out for each other on this dangerous run. As he grew lost in thought mulling over tomorrow's charge Arkumus gave a loud snort, shook his great head and stomped the ground with a huge foot. The big horse could smell enemy soldiers below and was eager to be after them. If it were up to Arkumus he would be flying down the hill right now to begin the attack on the Roman invaders.

The big horse brought Anthon out of his pondering on the battle to come. He looked to the Captains on their mounts lined up alongside him across the top of the hill. Their War-horses were growing just as anxious and angry as Arkumus the longer they stayed. Anthon

made hand signals to the Captains asking if they had need to stay longer. All signaled they did not so Anthon quietly led them away and back to camp.

As Anthon rode back he threw his mind out to the forest in the south. Even with his enhanced hearing through the wolf-bond he could barely hear any of the packs of Tundras barking and howling as they ran through the forest on the hunt. Many of the packs were still pursuing their prey, but through the Wild Wolf Magic he knew Granit made his kill. Though there was a great distance between them Anthon could feel his bond-mates bloodlust during the chase and his satisfaction as he brought down his quarry. He felt the strength and confidence flowing through the big wolf as he fed, and in turn the same feelings flowed through him. The Wolf Magic was strong tonight under the Full Blood Moon above.

"Make sure the men are up and ready to ride before sunrise," Anthon said to the Captains as they returned to the camp. "But more importantly make sure they get some rest tonight."

He looked out at the forest that was muted in a red hue wondering if the Blood Moon was just as bad an omen for the Romans as it was for them. He looked up at the moon and could see it was starting its slow turn back to its cold white light as if the blood were draining from it.

With Gilly at his side Anthon took a slow walk through the hastily thrown up camp. They moved from campfire to campfire holding brief conversations with each group of men sitting around them. It was between campfires the two, who had known each other since childhood, talked amongst themselves.

"Not much more to it now Tone, ye've done all what can be done from what I be see'in," Gilly said. Tone was Anthon's childhood name when the two were boys growing up. "Don't think I not be notice'in ye not slept in a week laddie, take'in care and worry'in bout every little bit. Our wolves be talk'in to one another, don't ya know. They may be devils, but there be times when the devils care, and Shadow be tell'in me Granit be worry'in. Go on an get yourself a quick bite. An then ye best be on to your tent an sleep a few, that be Gilly's orders!"

There were times his friend could be a real saddle sore, especially when he was scolding. However, in this instance Gilly was not wrong, and Anthon could tell he was serious because he was easier than usual to understand. Sometimes his friend's accent was so thick it was hard to figure out what he was trying to say.

Gilly was the son of immigrants who came from the land of Alba in the Emerald Isles. During a time of war and great strife in the Isles his grandparents moved their families to pursue a more peaceful life in the Wolf Lands. His people were farmers who only wished to work the land and be left alone. Every turn hundreds of families immigrated to the Wolf Lands from as far away as the Isles in the West, from the cold barbarian lands of the North and from the distant land of China in the Far East. Even families from the plains of the

Mongol Horde came to the Nation to make a life. As long as the immigrants had peace in their hearts and were kind to their neighbors they were welcomed with open arms.

It was a long standing tradition to take people in going back over a thousand turns when the Wolf People were but a group of nomads who traveled the lands around the Ionia Sea far to the South. The group of nomads started with the coming together of sixteen Clans who named themselves only the People. The leaders of the Clans in those ancient times were of the belief accepting strangers into the tribe with different skillsets only made them stronger. It was a belief that served them well and the sixteen Clans were now the Sixteen Provinces of the Wolf Nation.

Gilly's family settled in the northern part of the Alteran Province and thrived. Anthon usually had no problem understanding his childhood friend. However, he was most times lost in the conversation when visiting Gilly's family. They talked much too fast with the very heavy accent of the Isles.

"I'm on my way old friend," Anthon said with a chuckle. "Do me a favor on the way to your tent, make sure the men are bedding down. We all need to get some sleep, tomorrow's gonna be a long one."

"Will do, Captain," Gilly acknowledged. "Now off to bed with ya! I'll not be explain'in to your wee lass the Romans gotcha cause you be tired. And I be know'in if'in ya don't, Granit be talk'in don't forget!"

With that Gilly walked away, on to the next camp fire. As Anthon headed towards his tent he could hear the Sergeant loudly saying, "Time for bed ya silly sods! Big day tomorrow, lots to do, Romans ta kill!"

Anthon finally got to the tent set up for him and found Granit inside returned from his hunt. The big wolf lay in the corner of the dimly lit tent and all Anthon could see of him were his hooded eyes of molten gold. As he entered a slow and steady thump started up as a heavy tail began hitting the tarp spread upon the ground, the big wolf was happy to see his bond-mate. Anthon turned up the lantern giving light to Granit and his muzzle covered in blood. The wolf was happily crunching on a large bone brought back from the stag he and his pack-mates brought down at the beginning of the night. Anthon wetted a cloth as he went over to sit by his bond-mate and began giving him a good scratching behind the ears while tenderly wiping away the blood from his snout. All the time he showered the big wolf with love through the bond. He closed his eyes and took a moment to enjoy the feelings of contentment, happiness and a deep love the wolf rolled tenfold back to him. He could feel Granit held no sense of concern about tomorrow's upcoming battle, nor for anything else he could not control for that matter. The big wolf helped Anthon's thoughts to mellow and a great relief came over him while his mind wandered in the bond.

All throughout the camp wolves were helping to calm their bond-mates down as they returned from their night hunt. They were helping them to get the rest they would need for the battle tomorrow. Anthon felt himself starting to relax as he sat on his cot and slowly

peeled off some of his armor. There was no more to be done now, he thought. What was left was now in the hands of the Maker. He was glad the preparations were over and the time for action was finally here. Gilly was not far from the mark when accusing him of not getting any sleep this last week. He laid back on his cot and closed his eyes knowing some sleep would do him good, even if it was only for a couple of hours.

It was during those few short hours of sleep that Anthon came suddenly awake. He was startled as he felt his daughter Natalia to be in great danger and in a fight for her life. He looked over to Granit who was sitting up and looking about with his eyes of liquid gold the size of saucers. They both felt the strife she was in, but they also felt a bubble of strength all about her. Through the Wild Wolf Magic Granit could feel a vague connection between Natalia and two distant members of his Clan. Neither he nor Anthon could make sense of what this meant. The two could not comprehend the feelings they were sensing, and worst yet, both knew there was nothing they could do. Blessedly the feelings of danger for Natalia started to dissipate almost as quickly as they began. Granit came to lay next to Anthon and once again they both put their heads down. The memory of what awoke them began to fade as bad dreams usually do. Anthon hoped it was only a night terror as he said a silent prayer to the Maker for the safety of his daughter. For the second time that night he fell into a deep slumber, but the second time was not near as restful as the first.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the early morning light two rows of Rangers mounted upon their War-horses were lined up along the top of the hill above Crescent Cove. At the center of the front line sat Anthon upon a steel clad Arkumus. At the moment the Over-Captain's chief concern was not on the readiness of his Rangers and their mounts, what held his attention most were the strangely silent warriors around him. To the left of him was Sergeant Gilgarhad upon a very fidgety Tyrant. The Sergeant had as little to say as the other men around him. Usually before a battle the Rangers would be talking in friendly banter and trading jests with one another to help ease tensions, and Gilly was one of the worst offenders of this behavior. All Anthon could hear from his friend were tense whispers filled with his very extensive vocabulary of curse words as he fought to keep Tyrant under control. The silence of these men around him was a bit unnerving. There were only two things Anthon could attribute to keeping the Rangers so quiet. The first was the unease they felt going up against a foe most had never fought before. They knew what to expect when fighting Barbarian or Mongol raiders, but these Romans who were so well equipped and seemed to be very disciplined were a mystery to them. The second was the dangerous charge down the steep hill filled with trees.

As the Over-Captain looked up and down the line he noticed every Ranger looking intently down the hill in an effort to find the bottom. They were trying to peer through a ground hugging mist floating amongst the trees which was hiding the severity of the hill they would soon be charging down. Anthon did not need to look, he had been here and studied the hill enough times in the last month to know what they were truly up against. Soon all

the Rangers and War-horses would know as the mist was quickly burning off from the heat of the rising sun.

Anthon could hear the slight jingle of metal on metal up and down the line from the small bits of the War-horses's tack. Encased in their armor coats the first row of horses appeared to be great beasts of steel. Steam shot from their noses to mix with the dust they were stirring up as they pawed at the ground with tree trunk legs and huge feet. Their faceplates sprouting with spikes were wickedly dangerous as they moved their heads up and down in the eagerness for the charge. This was the Over-Captain's heavy cavalry and they were truly a frightening sight to behold. The second row of War-horses, the light cavalry, were by no means to be counted out as a lesser fighting force. They looked every bit as lethal and ready for war in their armor of boiled leather and brass. The big horses of both lines were growing excited as the scent of the enemy soldiers below grew stronger with every passing moment. They stepped from hoof to hoof, anxious to make the run down the steep hill and attack the advancing army.

The War-horses had good reason to be confident of the charge they would make down the hill. This little jaunt was nothing compared to the highlands of the Tallspine Mountains where they grew up. As colts they learned to run with speed and agility across grassy meadows and through thickly forested mountainsides chasing after high mountain deer in games of tag. They played follow the leader with nimble Mountain Goats up and down rocky cliff sides learning how to maneuver their big three toed hooves and grip the narrow ledges of rock. There was no sign of any fear amongst the almost two hundred War-horses ready to make the rush down the hill and fall upon the enemy.

The riders sitting on top of their huge mounts were not as confident of the run down as they. The forest of tall pines growing on the hillside seemed to be spaced a little too close together for comfort. With so many War-horses running down the hill together they worried there would be little room to maneuver and collisions with the thick tree trunks, and each other, would be hard to avoid. The deep bed of pine needles blanketing the hillside also concerned the Rangers sitting upon their mounts. The slippery needles were difficult to walk on let alone run upon. Concern was high amongst nearly all of the Rangers that everyone would make it to the bottom safely. Most had never seen their War-horses running throughout the high mountain meadows of the Tallspines. The ones who did visit the homelands of the War-horses were much less fearful because they knew what their mounts were capable of. Anthon ordered the Wolf Pack Captains to line up their Rangers intermingled with those who had visited the mountain homes. With the help of these men, the confidence of their mounts and the soothing thoughts they were receiving from their bond-mates the anxious Rangers began to calm as they looked down the hill. There was still a bubble of worry and doubt, but the Rangers, one and all, were the bravest of men. Despite their concerns there were none who would show the slightest hesitation about making the charge.

Some of the horses wore steel boots on their main hooves. Deadly in combat but their riders worried they would be very slippery on this surface of pine needles. Arkumus was

one of the horses with the steel boots wrapping around his huge main hooves. The War-horses without the steel had slightly better traction on the slippery surface. Anthon ordered these to be first off the line when the charge began. He hoped the ones following with the steel boots would have better traction on the tore up ground. With the extra weight of their armor it was going to be quite a challenge. But War-horses were strong and they did not know failure. They would make this run with not an ounce of fear.

The first Wizard-fire arrow went high in the air and exploded into an angry red ball. Anthon could tell by the height of the arrow enemy Officers had entered the cove. When one more Wizard arrow shot higher into the sky he would know there were over a thousand enemy soldiers in the cove. The time to charge would be upon them.

"Your mind be set on this course then?" Gilly asked quietly, and not for the first time. He knew the answer without Anthon saying a thing. "Then we will see'er done."

The Rangers on the lines were starting to hear a great amount of movement going on down below. The sounds of an army on the march were growing so loud they were beginning to drown out the noise of the waves crashing on the shore. They could hear men shouting to each other and the banging of armor and weapons. The noise was growing louder with every passing moment.

Through the clearing mist Anthon could see Roman soldiers trying to make the climb up the hill. In minutes they would be in contact with the Mansers and Rangers hiding behind the trees. He had split the initial force up to help protect the charge. About thirty men were below spread all along the hillside hiding behind the trees. Besides engaging any Romans trying to climb the hill they were also Anthon's spotters. These men would have eyes on him during the attack looking for orders he would give using hand signals. Their job was very important as they would pass on where Anthon might need a barrage of arrows sent, especially iron arrows from the Giants. Thirty Rangers of the Thirteenth would be watching the roads and the trails atop the inland cliffs leading to the hill. Anthon knew it would not take long into the battle before the Romans sent their cavalry on the inland roads along the hills and cliffs to Crescent Cove. It only made sense they would do this to skirt the barricade below. The men watching the inland road would send up a yellow Wizards-fire arrow when they spotted the enemy coming. Depending on how many yellow warning arrows were sent into the sky Anthon would know how much time they had before retreating. The other twenty Manser and Rangers were with the Giants at the end of the cove. They were the stopping power to keep the Romans in the cove while his men slaughtered them. Hopefully they could hold.

"This best be happen'n soon Tone," a sweat drenched Gilly said. "Or I be make'n this charge by me lonesome." Tyrant was getting ever so hard to hold back. At Anthon's urging Arkumus moved next to the big War-horse to help calm him. Shadow came sliding up on the other side giving soft growls to also help calm the horse. They helped to ease him a bit, but Anthon could see it wouldn't last long. Tyrant's aggressive desire to charge was

beginning to infect all the War-horses. They were each feeding off each other and were getting hard to hold back. Anthon hoped that second arrow would come soon.

The Tundras all laid about in the shade of the forest behind the lines, as if it were just any other day. They would not charge until Granit got up to lead them, or if they sensed their bond-mate was in trouble. They preferred following the horses instead of having to worry about running under or near their big feet, a wolf could get hurt doing that.

The second Wizard-fire arrow was shot from the end of the cove. It must have been launched by a Giant for it flew so high into the sky men could see it for miles around. The explosion was deafening and the red ball of anger was even larger than the one before. Anthon signaled the charge and the first line of War-horses jumped onto the steep hill.