

Eagle and Wolf

Brad Ellison

We were in dire straits the night the howling began; a pack of wolves, full-throated, voices raised in a feral chorus. I had heard such before, in Italy, in Gaul, here in Germania, but this was different. Perhaps the blood and fear of recent days played tricks on the imagination, but I heard notes in that howl that sounded like human speech. The others heard it as well, and to a man we shuddered. All save one.

"They sing my funeral dirge, lads, nothing more! Why should a Roman fear the milk-brothers of Romulus and Remus? Find your balls!" The Centurion laughed, a sickly wet sound that devolved into a vicious hacking cough. "Oi, Marcus, come over here! Heed a dying man's last words!"

I came, and knelt at his side. The Centurion had lived a full life, all in uniform, his skin tanned to leather by the sun of Judea and Africa. But beneath the brown, his skin had a pallor now, and his hard face drew tight with pain. The improvised bandages around his chest were soaked red.

"Listen, Marcus. You're the veteran of this country, and you're in command now. Do what you can to get these boys back home alive, and damn everything else!" He coughed again, and spat a nugget of blood and spongy tissue onto the ground. "I always knew I'd die on this side of the Rhine. A fortune teller told me that when I was first stationed on the border, little more than a green recruit. I'd have liked to see Sicily again, but it can't be helped."

There would be but eight of us left as soon as the Centurion gave up and let the sucking wound in his chest claim him. Eight of us cut off and without supplies on the wrong side of the river. I had no qualifications to lead, save for having been a year longer

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on the German frontier than the others. That was better than nothing, and at the edge of the Empire, the men of the Legions made do with what they had.

"I'll bring them home safe, sir," I said to him. I couldn't meet his eyes when I said it, because we both knew it was probably a lie.

"Do it or die trying, boy." The centurion coughed again, and his flinty gaze relaxed as he allowed his eyes to lose focus.

"Jove, Mars," he said, "I never gave much thought to you in life and I won't play the sycophant to you on death's door. I commend my soul to Julius Caesar, the finest commander a Roman soldier could have in life or death, mortal Emperor or deathless god!" Those were his last words. I closed his eyes when his breathing finally stopped, the distant howling still filling my ears.

We wrapped him in his cloak, and with heavy hearts we dug a shallow grave for him, covering him with stones and branches as best we could. I took up his shield, for I'd lost my own in the ambush that had separated us from the rest of the Legion, and I prayed the Roman eagle he'd painted on it would ward us from the danger on all sides. The howling did not abate as we said our quick prayers over him and moved on, chasing the coming dawn in the general direction of the Rhine.



Dawn came at last, giving us certainty of where East lay and light to see the ground at our feet. I hacked at vines and brambles and branches with my gladius, then pushed through with my shield to force a path where there was none, and my companions followed.

We were hungry, tired, and frightened. Discipline is the iron in the spine of every Legionnaire, but discipline can only carry men so far, and the youngest men, Gaius and Cassius, were particularly close to the edge. Their wide eyes told me that, and the way their heads snapped to track every unexpected

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movement. It had been their first real battle, and they were unused to the thick woods.

We had eaten the last of our supplies and drunk almost the last of our water, when we came upon a path. Not a track made by deer or boar, but a proper path cleared and walked by men, wide enough for a wagon and marked with wheel-ruts and hoof prints, running very nearly the direction we needed to go.

Any road in the wood had to have been laid down by the Germani, and we risked capture and death to walk it. On the other hand, it meant quicker and easier marching, and if the road ran all the way to the river, there would likely be a Legion outpost on the opposite bank to watch it. The Centurion might have pushed us on through briar and branch, fearing no wolf and feeling no hunger. I was a weaker man, and the ache in my sword arm and the gnawing in my belly helped make my decision.

We made good time once free of the grasping underbrush, and covered ground easily. The road curved slightly, concealing the trail before and behind us with its arc, but this seemed to put us even more directly on a path straight to the river.

After some two hours, we came to a small village in a clearing. We were on guard as soon as we saw it in the distance, but we heard no human sound, and as we approached we saw no sign of life. Slowly, scanning to the left and right, we walked into that clearing, and found ourselves seemingly alone among perhaps a score of empty huts ringed round a stone well.

We formed up and scouted the village. It was indeed deserted, but we found a little meal, some mushrooms, and a few dried roots that had been left behind. We also found a small stone altar in the center of the clearing by the well, on which lay small offerings of dried meat to whatever god these barbarians worshiped. We ate, had our fill of water, and refilled our skins.

We were careless. An enemy might have murdered the lot of us as we drank. Instead, we were startled by a loud cackling from the edge of the clearing. An old woman stood there in the shadow of the trees, white hair hanging in her face, leaning on a crooked staff. She continued to laugh at us as we approached her, weapons in hand.

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"Look at you!" she said in thickly accented Latin. "The Eagles of Rome! It's a bunch of starved chickens you are, pecking in an empty yard!"

"Where are the rest of you?" I asked her, thinking of warriors waiting in the trees with spears ready.

She laughed even harder, and as we drew close I saw that her arms were covered in long wiry white hairs. Her white brows were long and thick, meeting in the center of her face below a low hairline, giving her features a savage cast. "The young men went to fight the dreaded Legion, to show the dogs of Rome whose land this is. The young women went off to hide in the forest, taking the old men and the children with them, lest stray pups stumble on this place."

"And you didn't go with them?" I felt the gooseflesh rising as my hairs stood up. This was not how solitary old peasants spoke to armed troops.

"Do I look like I fear Romans? I'm too old to dread rape or murder. My bones are brittle as dried clay, my heart barely beats, and every night I go to sleep expecting not to wake. Besides, why should I fear prey? I've heard the howls at night, and know the pack is stalking."

"What do you know about it?" said Gaius, wide-eyed. This made her laugh again.

"The little eagles with their clipped wings are lost in the bramble now, far away from their nest. Little hatchlings, the wolf pack enjoys easy prey, and they love to torment Romans."

"What kind of beast torments men?"

She grinned at us, showing long white teeth sharp and strong-looking despite her age. "The kind that walks on two legs, at least sometimes. There are things in the woods that your people will never understand, for all your books and ciphering. Never fear though! When they run you down at last it'll be on four legs, for that's the way they love best to hunt!"

At that she turned her back to us and stepped back towards the woods. Before she passed into the trees, Gaius flung his pilum. The long iron head punched through her frail body and came out between her breasts. I was cursing him even before she

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hit the ground, but it was wasted air. He'd broken, forgotten discipline and acted on instinct.

If we ever managed to escape this forest, I thought to myself as I pulled the javelin from the old hag's corpse, we would be little better than wolves ourselves.

I retrieved the pilum, checking to make sure it hadn't bent or warped and wiping the blood off with the corner of Gaius' cloak. I kept eye contact with him while I took his weapon and soiled his garment, a primitive assertion of dominance like a big dog eating a smaller one's meal. He didn't challenge me, and with my status as the stronger dog clarified I led us on down the path in the direction of the river. It wasn't military discipline, but it served to at least keep him moving with the group.



Hours later, I heard a wet choking sound behind me, and turned to see Cassius fall with a spear through his throat.

It was a Roman pilum, but the wooden shaft was carved with Germanic runes, and where the wood joined the iron there was a long streamer made from an animal's pelt, a familiar weapon dressed in barbaric trappings. I catalogued these details as I registered the spurting blood and the red foam that came from Gaius' mouth as he tried to say something, his eyes welling up with horror as damp wheezes came out of the ruined tubes of his neck. The weight of the shaft tore the spear free as he fell, and it tore through the whole substance of his throat as it did.

We had instinctively formed a ring around his body, eyes out to the forest, shields up and weapons in hand. We saw nothing in the trees, but we heard mocking laughter in the distance, and then, receding, the sound of a human throat imitating a wolf's howl.

Then nothing.

We left him where he fell and marched on, eyes and ears straining, praying to all the gods.

The river. We had to make the river. The gods-damned Rhine had to be near, and this barbarian trail seemed to be leading right

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to it, and if we made the river we'd be all right. With good luck, if this trail ran all the way to the river there'd be a Legion outpost on the other side. We were in poor condition to fight, especially against stealthy enemies with unknown numbers, but we were Roman soldiers, and by Mars, we could march until our legs were worn down to stumps. Fear and hunger and exhaustion were reducing us to a pack rather than a unit, but the discipline of marching was hammered into every Roman Legionnaire, into the very muscle and bone, deeper than the soul.

We marched. One foot in front of another again and again and again.

Though we watched and listened as sharply as our tired eyes and ears could, we detected no sign of our attackers. There was no doubt in my mind that they were still with us, however. In the woods, watching from the trees, moving silently in a forest they knew intimately, creeping perhaps on all fours like...

I dreaded the setting of the sun. It came soon enough, the reddening light and long shadows as the sun set over our shoulders and left us alone in the dark. The howling began again.

We marched, bodies and minds numb to all sensation, even the terrible predators' song that came from the woods on either side of us and kept pace with us as we marched. We understood the grimness of our situation but were past caring. Our food was gone, we were as weary as we'd ever been, and our nerves were raw and frayed.

I saw the Centurion marching beside me in the moonlight, his guts torn out and his limbs ravaged with the marks of canine teeth. He looked at me with his dull milky eyes and said "Killing you lot would be a mercy right now. That's the only reason they're not doing it."

I didn't have anything to say to that. It wasn't anything I didn't already know.

"They'll cut you down before you make the river. Death's inevitable now, and they'll ravage your corpses with sharp teeth and hack you apart with axes. That's a prophecy. You'll die running, or die fighting."

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I stumbled on a root, and when I looked up again the ghost was gone. The howling had not abated.

"Right," I said, holding up a hand to signal halt. "No sense in our half-killing ourselves just to make it easier for them to finish the job. We'll form a ring with our backs to that oak there, and sleep till dawn. Then we resume, and I think we'll make the Rhine by the afternoon."



I didn't dream, not from the moment I closed my eyes to the moment the dawn light woke me. Aching and ravenous, we lapped up water from our skins and set our feet again to the trail.

We were not shut of the howling. It came from human throats, and it was mixed with mocking laughter. The sounds again came at us from both sides of the trail, and kept pace with us as we marched, but not a footstep or rustling leaf did we hear, nor any sign of our invisible stalkers.

By noon they had made no move against us, but had begun lacing taunts and insults in German and crude Latin into their mockery. They sang a German parody of a Legion marching song at one point, and though I caught but a few words, obscene and blasphemous against our gods and mothers, the meaning was clear enough from the way they laughed. We snarled at the voices, not wasting words. We bared our teeth at them, but that only made them laugh more.

I cut a strip of leather from my belt and chewed it as I walked, and behind me the men did likewise. I felt mad, unable to discern reality from a terrible dream.

Gaius broke. Turning to the forest he began to scream, drawing his gladius and beating it against his shield. "Fight, damn you! Come out and fight you godless pagan sons of bitches! Why won't you fight?"

The forest went silent. There was tension in that moment, the air taut as a snare's wire as we waited to see what came next. I was certain for a moment that everyone would break with him, go

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berserk, and that we would all die screaming like lunatics in the road.

When no one moved to join him, he screamed again, wordlessly now, and plunged forth into the trees with his sword swinging in broad flashing arcs. He vanished into the brush, swallowed by the forest, but still we heard his ferocious howls of rage and desperation.

Then they were cut off with a sudden choked sound.

Still we stood there, dumb as statues, staring after where he'd vanished, the silence drowning us. Then the laughter and the man-howls began again. We marched. What else could we do?



Weariness and hunger wore us down, and my grip on reality began to slip. The world came to me in fragments, shards, scraps and tatters of the world around me. The texture of the leather between my teeth. The ache in my calves. Blue sky, green leaves, brown earth. A voice from the forest telling us that his grandfather had raped Julius Caesar and he'd do the same to us soon. Smell of blood on the leaves. A groan like a dying mule as Brutus behind me stopped and never started again. I thought I saw Gaius' face flayed off his skull and nailed to a tree to watch us with eyeless sockets, but when I blinked it was gone. The howling never stopped.

The river was the thing that broke the spell. We were five, Marcellus and Durio and Vitus and Bato and I. In the red light of the setting sun the Rhine looked like blood, but the forest receded as we approached the bank and the sound of rushing water cut through the mocking howls and we were men again. We had marched through Hell and Hell's Latrines to get here, but we were within sight of hope and salvation. Across the river was safety. Across the river was the Roman Empire. Across the river was home. As I'd hoped, there was a Legion stockade on the opposite bank, and I could just see the glint of the dying Sun shining on the Eagle of Rome.

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The pack at our heels must have been waiting for us to feel this rising sense of hope, because killing us when we had full hearts was so much more satisfying than simply ending us while we were hollow and spent. They came from the trees, naked save for mud and woad and wolfskin belts, axes in their hands, and swords and dirks, hairy as beasts themselves and barefoot, loping towards us with iron glinting red in the dying sunlight. I don't know how many, but oh, more than five, many more than five.

One died with my pilum in his chest. Exhausted or not, I threw it true and strong across twenty paces to strike him down, and then I drew my gladius and set the Centurion's shield before me as they closed the distance. To my left and right my shield-brothers did likewise, and we stood shoulder to shoulder as Legionnaires. Tired, hungry, wounded, worn, hounded unto Death's door and driven mad, broken down to component pieces and taken to the limits of human endurance, by Mars and by all the gods we were Romans and were going to die like Romans.

They came at us, and we held. We had no reserves of energy, no strength, nothing but will to keep us standing and fighting, and even that was depleted. What we did have was each other, each man guarding the man at his side, and we knew how to fight as a unit.

The German wolves knew how to hunt as a pack, but they had no discipline, no formation. If they had, they would have taken us in that first clash, for we had little enough to resist them with. They came at us, and axes rattled against shields, and swords bit into naked flesh, and they yelped and leapt back.

I had taken a shallow cut on my sword arm, and Marcellus had been stabbed in his left shoulder, but we all still stood, and two of the pack were dead at our feet. They stood back, circling, trying to flank, and we kept our shields between them and us and kept moving steadily towards the river.

I realized the first attack had been just a taste, feeling us out. They truly were coming after us like a wolf pack. I knew then what they were about to do and so was not surprised when they came at us from both sides, and fell back when we resisted.

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We were all still on our feet, weapons in hand, ready to fight. Men should not be able to fight after an ordeal like ours. But we were more than men; we were Romans.

They came again, trying to get behind us, between us and the river, and somehow we kept them from it. Marcellus was dead now, his weakened shield arm unable to stop the axe that took him at the juncture of neck and shoulder.

The Moon was in the sky. The Sun sank below the horizon. The pack changed.

The naked reavers began to shudder as if palsied, and a purely lupine howl burst from their throats, and their skins split apart to reveal gray fur beneath as they dropped their weapons and fell to all fours. I had known they would, had been expecting it and waiting for it, but even so, it was a wrenching thing to see. The men burst apart at the seams like swollen wineskins and beasts stood in their place, eyes and teeth flashing in the moonlight.

They were vulnerable as they changed, and we cut down three more, but then we had the pack to deal with, swifter than before, low to the ground and darting at our legs.

We had not stopped moving for the river, but now they had us surrounded. We stood back to back now, too tired to hold our shields up. Durio was brought down by a wolf that leapt at him and took out his throat, though he made it pay in kind, burying his gladius in its belly and ripping it open.

They closed on us, and all was chaos. There was no more formation, no discipline, just two-legged beasts with swords against four-legged beasts with teeth. My arm popped from the socket as the eagle-painted shield was torn from it, and my sword's blood-slick hilt slipped from my numb fingers. I felt teeth in my leg, and hot breath at my throat, and I struggled feebly against their strength like a man in the throes of a dream.

Something exploded inside me. I would not die this way.

I would not.

I felt a ferocious heat start at the center of my being, and spread swiftly through my flesh. My skin split apart, my armor was torn loose with the fury of the metamorphosis, and my limbs reshaped themselves with sharp cracks that sounded like breaking

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bone. Then I stood naked on four legs, my nose filling with infinite scents and the riverbank lit up like noon by moonlight. My teeth tore flesh, paws scrambling for purchase as I writhed through the pack around me.

Then I was in the river. Cold and swift, I was enveloped by the Rhine. It bore me away from the bloody mud pit where I should have died, and the rush of water in my ears drowned out entirely the sound of the pack's vengeful howling, and the tearing sound of fangs ripping as the pack subdued the other newborn wolves who once were Roman soldiers.

Dawn light woke me, piercing my eyelids as I lay naked in the mud on the bank of the river. I was on the right side, the Roman side. I was home.

Home, but not free. My mouth was still full of the blood of other men. My mind was still full of the wolf within me, only temporarily bound by human skin. I breathed, my heart beat, but the Roman soldier I'd been was as dead as any of the others.

I'd crossed the river, but I brought the forest with me.