

Eagles at War

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This book is for my readers – every single one of you. You come from all over the world, from every continent bar Antarctica.* Your loyalty gives me the freedom to be a full-time writer, and to do a job that I adore.

For this, you have my heartfelt thanks.

* If you've worked in Antarctica, and read my books when there, please let me know!

'Quintili Vare, legiones redde!' 'Quintilius Varus, give me
back my legions!'

Cassius Dio's record of the Emperor Augustus' reaction to the news of
Varus' fate

Prologue



Germania, 12 BC

The boy had been fast asleep, but the insistent shaking of his shoulder woke him at last. He opened gummy eyes to find a figure stooped over him. Profiled by the weak lamplight behind, his father's face – bearded, keen-eyed, framed by braids of hair – was frightening, and he recoiled.

‘It’s all right, little bear. I’m no ghost.’

‘What is it, Father?’ he mumbled.

‘I have something to show you.’

Behind the powerful figure that was his father stood his mother. Even in the gloom of the longhouse and fuddled with sleep, he could see that she was unhappy. His gaze returned to his father. ‘Is Mother coming?’

‘No. This is something for men.’

‘I’m only seven.’

‘No matter. I want you to see this. Out of bed. Get dressed.’

His father's word was law. Slipping from under the warmth of his bear pelt, he shoved his still-stockinged feet into his boots, which sat by his low bed. Rummaging for his cloak, which doubled as a second blanket, he threw it around his shoulders. ‘I’m ready.’

‘Come.’

As they passed his mother, she reached out. ‘Segimer. This is not right.’

His father whirled. ‘He *must* see it.’

‘He is too young.’

‘Do not question me, woman! The gods are watching.’

With pursed lips, his mother stood aside.

The boy pretended that he hadn’t heard, or seen. Following his father, he slipped past the forms of sleeping slaves, the glowing fire, the cooking pans and wooden storage chests. The two doorways in the longhouse were opposite each other, in the middle of the building. From the other end, currents of warm air carried the rich odours, and the sounds, of their cattle, pigs and sheep.

His father set the lamp down as he went outside. He looked back. ‘Come.’

The boy moved to the doorway. Stars glittered overhead, but the night was still dark and intimidating. He didn’t like it, but his father was beckoning. Out he came, taking a deep breath of the cool, damp air. It chilled his nostrils, reminding him of the winter that was already nipping at autumn’s heels. ‘Where are we going?’

‘To the forest.’

The boy tensed. He loved being among the trees in the day, when he could play with his friends at hunting, or see who was best at finding deer tracks. He’d never been there at night, however. The forest would be a shadow world now, full of spirits, fierce animals and the gods knew what else. He had been woken many times by wolves howling at the moon. What if they met some?

‘Hurry!’ His father was already a distance along the path that led out of the settlement.

In that moment, being left alone outweighed the boy’s fear of what lay beyond the houses, so he chased after his father. He wanted to ask if they could hold hands, but he knew what the answer to that would be. Pacing by his father’s side was better than nothing. Segimer’s long sword, which marked him out as a wealthy man among their people, was also reassuring, knocking off his thigh as he walked, and reminding the boy that his father was a fearsome warrior, the equal – or better – of any in their Cherusci tribe.

His courage somewhat returned, he asked, 'What are we going to do?' Segimer looked down. 'We shall witness an offering to the gods, such as you have never seen.'

Excitement mixed with the fear in the boy's belly. He wanted to know more, but his father's stern tone, and the fact that he was striding ahead at a great speed, made him hold his tongue. Keeping up was what mattered. Mud squelched beneath their boots as they traced their way between a score of longhouses. A dog yapped as they passed one dwelling, setting off a chorus of others. Despite this noise, the village remained still. Everyone was asleep, the boy realised. It was late indeed. He grinned, thrilled. Staying up to watch a wedding feast with his friends, say, was one thing, but to go out in the depths of night, even to the forest, *that* was a treat. The fact that he was with his father, whom he idolised, made it even better. Segimer wasn't unkind or cruel, as some of his friends' fathers were, but he didn't have much to do with him. He was a distant man. Aloof. Always busy with other nobles; or hunting; or away, fighting the Romans. This time had to be enjoyed, the boy decided.

Their path led into the forest that sprawled to the south of their settlement. There were woods throughout the Cherusci's lands, Segimer had told the boy, but around the larger villages, much of it had been cut down so that the ground could be used for agriculture. To the west lay the river, a source of water and many types of fish. To the east and west, a patchwork of little fields produced grain, vegetables and grass for their livestock. The trees to the south provided wood for the tribe's fires, deer and boar for their tables, and sacred places for the priests to consult with the gods.

They had to be going to one of those spots, thought the boy, his unease returning. He was grateful that his father could not see him shiver. He had never dared to enter a grove. Once, he and his friends had ventured far enough to see the entrance to one. The horned cattle skulls nailed to the trees had tested their courage to the limit, and they had skulked back to the village in silence. Tonight, no doubt, they would be going beyond that

point. Sweat trickled down his back as they entered the forest. Be brave, he told himself. You can show no fear now, or later. To do so would bring shame on his family, and on his father.

For all of his resolve, he jumped when a figure stepped out from behind a tree. Cloaked, armed with a spear, he raised a hand in salute. ‘Segimer.’
‘Tudrus.’

The boy relaxed. Tudrus was one of his father’s most trusted warriors, and a man whom he’d known since he was tiny.

‘You woke the little bear.’

‘Aye.’ Segimer’s hand brushed the boy’s shoulder, a touch for which he was grateful.

‘Are you ready, lad?’ enquired Tudrus.

The boy didn’t know what he was agreeing to, but he nodded.

‘Good.’

Segimer peered at the path which ran in from the west to join the one he’d taken from the settlement. ‘Are there any more to arrive?’

‘They’re all here. Warriors of the Bructeri, Chatti, Angrivarii and Tencteri. Even the Marsi have sent noblemen.’

‘It will please Donar that so many have chosen to come,’ Segimer pronounced, eyeing the sky. ‘We’d best hurry. The moon will reach its zenith soon. That’s when the priests said they must die.’

Tudrus rumbled in agreement.

When they must die. Stifling his unease at what the words might mean, the boy concentrated on keeping up with his father.

BOOOOOOO!

The boy started forward with fright. He regained control fast, but beside him, he caught Tudrus smiling. His father frowned, indicating with his eyes that he was not to move again.

BOOOOOOO! BOOOOOOO!

The boy didn’t stir this time. The bizarre sound *had* to be from a horn, blown by a priest, but it felt as if it were a demon, or a god, announcing

his arrival in the grove. Ten heartbeats skipped past, then twenty, and still no one appeared. The boy's gaze slid from left to right, over the shadowy space, which was even more intimidating than he had imagined. The path into it had been frightening enough, a winding, muddy affair bounded on both sides by marsh. The entrance, a crude wooden archway decorated with cattle skulls, had been no better. But it was the sacred circle of oak trees, fifty paces across, in which he now waited with his father, Tudrus and a large group of warriors, which had set his guts to churning.

In its centre stood a pair of altars, enormous slabs of stone that looked to have been hewn by giants. On top of one, a pyre had been built; ominous dark red-brown stains marked the surface of the other. Before the altars, a large fire burned, the only source of light in the grove. One of two tables beside it was covered in an impressive array of bladed and serrated instruments, probes, tongs and hammers. The second was bare-topped. Ropes dangled from its four legs, testimony to its purpose.

The boy had expected to see animals tethered here. Religious ceremonies he'd attended in the settlement had seen cattle and sheep offered to the gods. Once, he'd witnessed – had his ears bombarded by – a boar being sacrificed. He could hear its screams still.

BOOOOOOO! BOOOOOOO! BOOOOOOO! The sound originated from behind the altars.

'Here they come,' whispered his father.

Curious now, the boy stood on tiptoe, craning his neck to see.

A procession wound its way out of the trees. First came two robed priests, blowing long cattle horns. Next were two magnificent white mares, led by acolytes, and pulling a chariot in which stood an old, stooped priest. His head was bent, and the boy knew that he was listening to the sounds made by the sacred horses. Important messages from the gods could be ascertained from their whinnies and nickers. Behind the chariot walked four more priests blowing horns, but it was the miserable figures who shambled after that really drew the boy's gaze.

Eight men, roped together at the neck and wrists. Seven of them wore

belted, off-white tunics that ended above the knee. The last's garment was red, and he alone wore a helmet, which bore an impressive transverse crest of red and white feathers.

'Romans,' the boy whispered in awe. He'd seen bodies of his people's enemies once before, left behind after a patrol had been ambushed by his father and the tribe's warriors. These were the first Romans he'd seen alive. They weren't unharmed, however. Even at a distance, and in dim light, the bruises and welts that covered the prisoners' bodies were obvious. Behind the Romans paced a dozen strapping acolytes, armed with long spears.

A queasy feeling rose from the boy's belly. Whatever happened to these men, it wouldn't be good.

His father seized his shoulder in a grip of iron and bent to his ear. 'See those bastards?'

He nodded.

'The Romans stand for everything that we do not, boy. Their empire stretches further than a man could walk in a year, yet they're not content. They seek always to conquer new lands. For decades now, their leader, *Augustus*' – his father spat the word – 'has desired to be emperor over us. Over our brethren, the Chatti, the Marsi and Angrivarii. He wants to make us his subjects, to be ground forever beneath the heels of his soldiers. He must never succeed!'

'Never, Father,' agreed the boy, remembering what had happened when the Romans had come to the area before. A nearby settlement had been torched; many had been slain, including his aunt and two cousins. 'We will stop him.'

'Stop him we will, *and* his cursed legions. So I will swear, with these other warriors. Donar will be our witness.' He gave the boy a rare smile. 'You will take the oath too.'

Wonder filled him. 'I, Father?'

'Yes, little bear. That is why you are here.' Segimer placed a finger on his lips, and then pointed.

Moving to the sides of the altars, the horn-blowers fell silent. All eyes watched the old priest as he dismounted from the chariot and shuffled to a position at the fire. The horses were led away, and the prisoners shoved forward by the acolytes until they stood by the tables.

‘We give thanks to you, Great Donar, for watching over us.’ The priest’s voice was strong for all his apparent frailty. ‘Your thunderbolts protect us, and your storm clouds bring us the rain without which our crops would wither and die. When we fight our enemies, your strength aids our struggle, and for this we are always grateful.’

Throughout the gathering, men were murmuring in agreement, rubbing hammer amulets, whispering prayers.

‘Of recent years, we have had need of your aid every summer. Vermin such as these’ – the priest stabbed a long fingernail at the prisoners – ‘come in their thousands to visit destruction on our lands. No one is safe from the Romans’ depredations, their bloodlust. Men, women, children, the old, the sick are slain or enslaved. Our villages are burned, and the crops and livestock stolen.’

Warriors made angry comments. The boy’s father’s knuckles were white upon the hilt of his sword. He felt his own fury surge. His aunt and her sons – his cousins – had been his favourite relations. These Romans had to be punished.

‘We gather tonight to make you an offering, Great Donar,’ intoned the priest. ‘To ask for your help in fighting these invaders. To ensure that they flee, defeated, to the far side of the river they like to call the *Rhenus*. To ensure that once there, they *never* return to your lands, and ours.’

‘DONAR!’ shouted Segimer.

‘DO-NAR! DO-NAR! DO-NAR!’ roared the warriors in reply. The boy joined in, but his reedy tones were lost in the deafening chorus. ‘DO-NAR! DO-NAR! DO-NAR!’

‘Make your oaths,’ ordered the priest when the noise had died down. Pride filled the boy as Segimer stood forward first.

‘I, Segimer of the Cherusci, swear before Donar never to rest until the

Romans have been driven from our lands forever. The gods strike me down if I ever stray from this path.'

The priest watched in silence as, one by one, the warriors pledged to toil without rest until their enemies had been vanquished and thrown back over the river. The boy's turn came last. Nervous before so many men, his voice faltered a little, but to his relief no one laughed or looked angry. The priest even gave him a nod of approval, and his father squeezed his shoulder when he returned to stand with the rest.

The priest gestured. Four acolytes seized the nearest captive, a short Roman with a round face, and hauled him forward, kicking and struggling. Without ceremony, he was slammed down on to the empty table and his limbs tethered.

A reverent silence fell, allowing the Roman's whimpering to be heard.

Still the boy didn't quite believe what was about to happen. Yet when he glanced at the faces around him, which had grown hard and cruel, the cold certainty of it could not be denied. His eyes were drawn back to the table, and the victim stretched upon it.

The old priest selected a curved iron probe and held it aloft. 'Without eyes, the Romans will be blind. They will not see our warriors' ambushes, or their secret camps.'

A hungry *Ahhhhh* rose from those watching. Surely he isn't . . .? The boy shuddered.

Two of the acolytes held the Roman's head immobile as the priest approached. His wailing intensified.

A deep voice began shouting in a tongue the boy didn't understand. It was the Roman in the helmet, who had pushed forward as far as his bonds allowed. He aimed his words at the priest, at the assembled warriors, at the acolytes.

'What's he saying, Father?' asked the boy in a whisper. 'Tudrus?'

'They are soldiers,' hissed Segimer. 'Honourable men, who do not deserve to be treated like animals. He is asking that they be slain with respect.'

‘Is he right, Father?’

Segimer’s eyes resembled two chips of ice. ‘Did they kill your cousins with honour? Or your aunt? Or the scores of unarmed villagers who also died that day?’

The boy did not know how his relations had died. Neither had he understood everything that the older youths had said about the Romans’ atrocities, but he *was* certain that gutting a pregnant woman was an evil thing. He hardened his heart. ‘No, Father.’

‘That is why they will die like beasts.’

They deserve nothing better, thought the boy.

The Roman’s shouting came to an abrupt halt as he was beaten to the ground by several acolytes. A gag was tied around his mouth. When that had been done, the priest stooped over the man on the table. A hideous shriek shredded the air. It rose higher than the boy would have thought possible. The priest placed something small, red and wet by the man’s side, and his screaming eased a little. A heartbeat later, it returned to its previous level, as the priest used his probe to delve into the man’s second eye socket.

Holding two small globes high with a scarlet-coated hand, the priest faced the warriors. ‘Blinded, the Roman cannot see us! Accept this offering, Great Donar!’

‘DO-NAR! DO-NAR! DO-NAR!’ the boy yelled until he felt his voice crack.

Sparks flared as the priest tossed the eyeballs into the fire.

‘DO-NAR!’ roared the warriors.

Replacing the probe, the priest selected a long-bladed knife. Dark blood gushed over his hands as he poked around in his victim’s mouth. A burbling scream rose, and the man thrashed about on the table.

‘Without a tongue, the Roman cannot speak his lies!’ A piece of flesh flew from the priest’s hand into the flames.

The boy closed his eyes. The prisoner has to die, he thought. He could have been the one who slew my cousins. A sharp jab from his father’s elbow forced him to observe once more.

‘DO-NAR!’

The priest plunged his blade into the Roman’s chest. With business-like intensity, he twisted it to and fro. The staccato rhythm of the man’s heels on the table went faster and faster, but then slowed right down. By the time the priest had discarded his knife in favour of a saw, they had stopped moving altogether. Before long, he had cracked open the man’s ribcage and freed his victim’s heart from the network of vessels that surrounded it. He brandished the small, bloody globe at the warriors like a battle trophy. ‘Without a heart, the Roman has no courage! No strength!’

‘DO-NAR! DO-NAR! DO-NAR!’

The boy was grateful for the shouting. Despite his hatred of the Romans, the spectacle was turning his stomach. He watched through half-closed eyes as the victim’s body was heaved on to the pyre and set alight, and as the second, third and fourth Romans were dispatched in similar manner to the first.

At length, Segimer noticed. ‘Observe everything!’ he snapped.

He obeyed with reluctance.

Segimer’s breath was hot in his ear. ‘Do you know how one of your cousins died?’

The boy wanted to answer, but his tongue felt like a plank in his mouth. He shook his head.

‘He had been trying to defend his mother, your aunt, from harm. He was only a boy, of course, so the Romans disarmed him with ease. They held him down, and one of them ran a spear up his arse. Right up, inside him. The whoreson didn’t shove it in far enough to kill him straightaway, though. He lingered on while they murdered his brother and violated his mother in front of him.’

Hot tears – of rage, of fear – ran down the boy’s cheeks, but his father wasn’t done.

‘Your poor bastard of a cousin was still alive when we reached the village that evening. It was left to his father, your uncle, to end his life.’ Segimer

pulled the boy's chin up, forcing him to meet his gaze. 'These are the kind of creatures that the Romans are. D'you see?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Would you want something like that to happen to your mother, or your younger brother? To your grandmother?'

'No!'

'Accept then that giving the Romans to Donar in this way is a good thing. A necessary thing. With the thunder god's approval, we cannot fail to defeat them.'

'I understand, Father.'

Segimer's eyes searched his, but the boy did not look away. At last his father nodded.

He watched every moment of the rest of the gory ceremony. Runnels of clotted blood coated the sacrificial table, and the air filled with a cacophony of screams and the cloying smell of burning flesh. Whenever the boy's stomach protested, he made himself think of his cousin, impaled on a spear, watching his mother and brother being abused and tortured. Those images drove all else before them. They made him thrum with rage, made him want to grab the priest's knife and stick it in Roman flesh.

I will remember this night forever, he pledged to himself. One day, as Donar is my witness, I will teach the Romans a lesson that they will never forget.

I, Ermin of the Cherusci, swear this.