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Eagles of the Empire

Britannia

Written by Simon Scarrow

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CHAPTER ONE

October, AD 52

'What do you think?' Prefect Cato asked as he stared down the slope towards the fortified settlement sprawling along the floor of the valley. While it was not nearly so formidable as the vast hill forts he had seen in the southern lands of Britannia, the Deceanglian tribesmen had constructed their defences well. The settlement had been built on raised ground close to the river that flowed swiftly through the valley. A deep ditch surrounded a turf rampart topped with a sturdy palisade. There was a fortified gateway at each end of the settlement where sentries kept watch up and down the valley. Cato estimated that there must be several hundred round huts within the defences. There were many animals penned in there as well, together with what looked like a cluster of tents – the covers of the stone-lined grain pits used by the natives.

Lying next to the young officer was Centurion Macro, his lined face crinkling as he squinted into the late-afternoon sunlight flooding the valley, giving a burnished glow to the stubbled fields and the dark-green boughs of the pine trees covering the slopes either side of the settlement. Both men had taken off their helmets and left them with the small patrol waiting on the other side of the ridge. The same men who had reported the unusual activity at the village the day before. With their dull brown cloaks and their cautious approach to the vantage point through the stunted trees covering the hill, Cato and Macro had avoided being seen by the enemy as they took stock of the Deceanglian warriors' preparations.

Macro, a tough veteran, pursed his lips briefly. 'Looks clear enough to me. They've gathered in men from the outlying villages.

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See that mob by the horse lines? Right by that stock of spears and shields. Ten denarii gets you one; that ain't no hunting party.' He paused and made a quick estimate of the enemy's strength. 'Can't be more than five or six hundred of them. No immediate danger to us.'

Cato nodded. It was true. The fort they had been posted to ten miles to the east was well positioned and garrisoned by the two units under his command: Macro's cohort of legionaries from the Fourteenth, and his own part-mounted auxiliary cohort. The Blood Crows, as they were known, thanks to the design on their banner, had once been a cavalry unit. The recent campaigns in the mountains of the west of the province had caused the loss of many of the army's horses. The training depot at Luntum had been working hard to supply remounts, but there were far too few to satisfy the needs of the army. As a result, half the men of Cato's cohort now served as infantry, and the unit had been posted, along with Macro's men, to one of the outposts tasked with protecting the frontier of Emperor Claudius's new province. A fresh draft of replacement troops had filled out the ranks of both units and brought them nearly up to the strength with which they had started the campaign against the mountain tribes. With over four hundred legionaries together with as many auxiliary troops, they were in no danger from the war party gathering in the settlement.

Which raised a question.

'So what are they up to?' Cato exchanged a brief look with his subordinate and guessed that Macro's thoughts were heading in the same direction. 'I'll send word to the Legate. Chances are there'll be similar reports from other outposts. In which case it looks like the Druids are back in business and we're going to have trouble again.'

'Bastards,' Macro hissed. 'Bloody Druids. Don't those wild-haired shits ever know when to give in?'

'It's their land, Macro. These are their people. Would we respond any differently if we were in their boots?'

'If we were in their boots, sir, the legions would never even have got a toehold on this island.'

Cato chuckled at his friend's hubris. 'While I admire your estimation of our fighting qualities, I can't help but grieve at your lack of empathy.'

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Macro snorted. 'Any warm feeling I might have had for those hairy barbarians disappeared a long while back, about the time they should have been smart enough to realise that they weren't ever going to give us a beating.'

'They've come close enough at times.'

Macro cocked an eyebrow. 'If you say so, sir.'

'And it's not as if they haven't contested us every step of the way.' Cato sighed. 'It's been nigh on ten years since the army first landed, and we don't feel much closer to securing the province. Of course, it doesn't help when even the natives who are supposed to be on our side are treated little better than animals.'

His companion shot him a weary look. Macro had heard his friend talking like this before and put it down to the younger man's peculiar appetite for the affectations of Greek philosophy, and a corresponding tendency to overthink the situation. It did not seem to have done the Greeks much good, he mused. After all, their land was now a province of Rome, just as the whole of Britannia would become one day. He cleared his throat before he responded.

'Yes, well, they'll get better treatment the moment they stop behaving like animals and accept our ways. But first we have to put the stick about and beat some sense into 'em.' He jabbed his thumb towards the settlement. 'Starting with them Druids. I'm telling you, our job here is going to be a lot less difficult the moment we nail the last of the bastards to a cross and leave him out to dry.'

'Maybe so,' Cato reflected. Macro's hostility to the Druidic cult was well founded. Though the island's tribal kingdoms were thoroughly divided, with half of them having made treaties with Rome before the first legionary had set foot on these shores, they were all steeped in reverence towards the Druids and were susceptible to their appeals to resist the invader. Even now, Cato knew, many of the tribes that had supposedly been subdued still looked to the Druids to continue the struggle. Many of their warriors had slipped across the frontier into these mountains to join the ranks of those still fighting Rome. The situation had been exacerbated by the death of the province's governor. Ostorius had been a seasoned commander when he had been assigned to Britannia. Too seasoned, as it turned out. The strain of fighting the mountain tribes had worn him out, and he

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had collapsed at an officers' briefing and died less than a month later.

It was poor timing. The legions had just won a hard-fought victory over the native warriors. Their commander, Caratacus, had been captured and sent to Rome with his family, and the spirit of his followers had been all but broken. And then the governor had died. At once the Druids seized on this as a sign from their gods that the Romans were cursed and that the tribes must continue the fight now that they had won divine approval. The outposts of the frontier were attacked, supply columns and patrols ambushed and the army had been obliged to fall back towards the more easily defended territory that fringed the lands of the Silurians, Ordovicians and Deceanglians. The lack of clear leadership had undermined the Roman position; the replacement governor would be unlikely to take command before spring. And now this fresh evidence that the tribes were gathering to renew the onslaught.

'I've seen enough,' Cato decided. 'Let's go.'

They crept back towards the treeline. Once they were safely within the shadows, the two men clambered to their feet and adjusted their sword belts and cloaks. Above them the boughs were already shedding their leaves. The foliage was russet and yellow, and the gentle breeze sent the more brittle leaves tumbling through the air. Cato, taller and more thin-framed than his friend, gave a shudder. He did not relish the thought of spending the long months of winter confined to the fort, which some wag on the previous governor's staff had given the name Imperatoris Stultitiam – The Emperor's Folly. It had been one of those quips that had passed into practice, and that was how the fort's name was described on all official correspondence. The winter climate of the island was miserable enough, Cato reflected, but here in the hills and mountains it was relentlessly cold, wet and windy.

Cato longed for the comforts of Italia, with its milder climate. More to the point, that was where his wife was waiting for his return, in the home they had bought in Rome. By now, Julia would have given birth to their first child, and Cato was anxiously awaiting a letter from her to set his mind at rest. It would be months, years maybe, before Britannia was settled enough for him to request permission to return to Rome, so he had already decided that he

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would ask Julia to travel to the island. The first towns of the new province were rapidly expanding, and although they were primitive affairs, they featured enough comforts to offer a semblance of the civilisation found in the rest of the empire. Besides, he and Julia would be able to see each other more easily, and Cato could savour some of the home life that he had been yearning for the moment he received news of her pregnancy.

Macro led the way up the slope through the trees, boots rustling through the fallen leaves and softly cracking the twigs underfoot. The ground soon evened out as they reached the crest of the hill and started to descend the other side towards the track where the squadron of auxiliary cavalry was waiting for them. With the hill between them and the enemy, the officers felt safe and able to speak in normal tones now that the danger of detection had passed.

'Do you really think those bastards are going to stick it to us before winter comes?' asked Macro.

Cato thought briefly before he nodded. 'More than likely. The Druids will want to strike swiftly while their people are still celebrating the death of Ostorius. They're going to make things difficult for us, but I doubt they will have the strength to drive us out of the mountains. Thank the gods they don't have Caratacus to lead 'em any more.'

'Yes, thank fuck for that,' Macro growled with feeling. 'Bastard had more tricks up his sleeve than a ten-sestertius whore.'

Cato arched an amused eyebrow. 'Colourful.'

Macro spat on the ground. 'And just our luck that we won't get any reward for capturing him, not once but twice. Instead, it's going to be some other lucky bastard who claims the credit.'

Cato could well understand his friend's bitterness. There was no justice in the situation, but he had served long enough in the army to know that a soldier rarely received his due. Not when there was a politician around ready to claim the success of others as his own.

'Wonder how Caratacus is going to be received in Rome when he arrives in chains,' Macro continued. 'Hope they give him the same treatment that Caesar gave that Gaul.'

'Vercingetorix?'

'Him, yes.'

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Cato recalled the man who had opposed Julius Caesar a hundred years before. Beaten at Alesia and taken prisoner, he had languished in a dungeon beneath Rome for several years before being dragged out into the streets and strangled as the centrepiece of Caesar's triumph. An unworthy end for a noble enemy, Cato thought. He hoped that Caratacus would be spared such a miserable and humiliating death by Emperor Claudius. He had fought bravely and tirelessly against Rome and deserved the respect of his enemies. Despite what Macro might feel.

'I hope not.'

Macro shot a wry glance over his shoulder. 'Pity for the noble barbarian?'

Cato smiled. 'Something like that.'

'Shit, when are you ever going to learn, lad? There's us, and there's them – the barbarians – standing in the way of Rome and our destiny. If they're smart, then they give way to us. If they don't, then more fool them. There's no room for pity in this world. That's all you need to know in our line of work.'

Cato shrugged. Such an informal exchange between a centurion and his commanding officer might usually be frowned upon, but the two of them had served side by side since Cato had joined the legions a decade earlier. In private company they still conversed with the informality of earlier years, and Cato valued that. Far better to have a comrade who could be relied on to speak his mind than one who would just obey mindlessly.

'Besides,' Macro continued, 'do you think for an instant that they return the favour? Not a bit of it. They hate our guts and would cut our throats in a trice if they could. The only people who believe in noble barbarians are those literary ponces back in Rome turning out their bloody histories. There's no such thing as noble barbarians, just barbarians.'

'I think you might have mined out this rich seam of invective long ago,' Cato responded. 'Why not do me a favour, and save your breath, eh?'

Macro pursed his lips and frowned. 'Please yourself, Prefect.'

The reference to Cato's rank betrayed Macro's hurt at the slight, and Cato sighed to himself as he followed his friend in silence. There

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was light ahead through the trees, and a moment later they emerged on to the native track that passed through the forest. They paused, breathing hard, and glanced to both sides, but there was no sign of the soldiers they had brought with them from the fort.

'I don't recognise this spot,' Cato muttered. 'Must have started out further along.'

'Which way?'

He looked up at the crest of the hill and spotted some crags he had seen earlier. 'To the left. Let's go.'

They paced quickly along the track, hemmed in by the trees on either side, the breeze swishing through the branches. A short distance further on, the path turned to follow the line of the slope, and there, fifty paces ahead, stood the patrol. Ten men waiting by their mounts, while one held the officers' horses as well as his own. Their cloaks, leggings and boots and the flanks of their horses were covered with mud. As soon as he spied the officers, Decurion Miro alerted his men and they readied themselves to mount.

'You were right, Decurion,' said Cato as they reached the patrol. 'There's trouble brewing.'

Miro bowed his head in acknowledgement, relieved that his commander agreed with his assessment. 'Your orders, sir?'

'Back to the fort. Then we'll pass on what we've seen to the legate.'

Miro stared at him. 'And what do you reckon Quintatus will do about it, sir?'

'It's not our place to second-guess the legate, Decurion.' Cato pulled himself up on to his saddle and swung his leg over the back of his horse, then gave the order. 'Mount!'

The rest climbed into their saddles with a chorus of grunts, creaking leather and the snorts of their sturdy mounts. Once the men had taken up their reins in their left hands and settled their lances into the saddle rests, Cato waved his hand forward and eased his horse into a trot along the track. It was narrow enough to oblige the Romans to ride in single file for a while before it left the forest and passed over open ground. Then Macro eased his mount forward to draw alongside the prefect.

'We'll need to get the lads ready to march, sir. In case Quintatus gives the order.'

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'I'm aware of that. I want you to prepare a full inventory of our supplies. I'll see to any shortfall at headquarters. We're not going to have a repeat of that nonsense earlier this year.'

Macro nodded with feeling. The two units of Cato's command had been tasked with guarding the baggage train, and the army's supply officer had put them at the back of the queue for replacement kit. It was only when Cato had cornered the junior tribune concerned and given him a thorough bollocking that the baggage train escort had finally been given what they needed. If Quintatus was forced into a fresh campaign, then this time it would be essential to ensure that the Blood Crows and Macro's legionaries were properly equipped and supplied for the rigours of mountain fighting.

Cato abruptly threw up his arm and reined in. In the time it took Macro to react, his horse had continued another length before drawing up. The remaining riders followed suit as Cato leaned forward in his saddle and scrutinised an outcrop of rocks looming over the track a short distance ahead.

'What is it, sir?' asked Macro.

'There's movement up there. I saw someone in the rocks.'

Macro stared a moment and puffed his cheeks. 'I can't—'

Before he could finish, a slight figure in a woollen tunic rose up and drew a bow. Macro instinctively reached for the handle of his sword, then paused before letting out a scornful laugh as he saw that it was a scrawny youngster.

'Be on your way! Before I tan your bloody hide!'

The Roman soldiers chuckled nervously, now that the tension had eased. The boy cried out defiantly in his own tongue and released the arrow. The shaft arced towards the horsemen and disappeared into the grass to one side of the track.

'Bloody cheek!' Macro snorted. 'I'll teach the little sod some manners before we take him prisoner.'

He spurred his horse towards the rock, cheered on by some of the auxiliaries. The boy drew another arrow and notched it before raising the bow again and taking aim at the cantering rider.

Cato cupped a hand to his mouth to call out a warning. 'Macro! Look out!'

The second arrow leapt from the bow and Cato saw at once

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that the youngster had aimed true, or was simply lucky given his moving target. Macro jerked in his saddle. His horse slowed to a trot, then stopped as the centurion leaned forward to inspect his leg.

'Fuck . . . Fucking little bastard has hit me.' His tone was more surprised than pained, and Cato urged his own mount forward. The boy stood above them, his mouth open in surprise at what he had done. Then the spell was broken as he lowered his bow and turned to flee.

'After him!' Decurion Miro bellowed.

Cato reined in beside Macro and saw the dark shaft protruding from the leather breeches covering his friend's thigh. Already blood was pulsing up around the wound and running down his leg to drip on to the track. The centurion shook his head in wonder, his lips twisted into a wry grin as he gritted his teeth. 'He's got me good, the little toerag. Lucky shot.'

Swinging himself down from the saddle, Cato approached to examine the wound. He felt a sick feeling in his gut as he saw that the blood was flowing freely. He was aware of the dark shapes of the riders pounding past as Miro led them after the native boy, and had the presence of mind to stand back and call after the decurion.

'Leave the boy! Decurion! Call your men back!'

The auxiliaries reluctantly abandoned the chase and watched the fugitive nimbly picking his way up the rocks towards the crest of the hill. It would be a fool's errand to pursue him. The boy was shrewd enough to stick to ground that was impassable to horses, and in any case, he would easily outpace the soldiers weighted down by their armour if they pursued him on foot. Cato turned back to his friend.

'We have to stem the bleeding, Macro. It's bad.'

'I can see that for myself, thank you.'

Cato drew a sharp breath. 'You know what I have to do?'

'Just get on with it.'

'All right.' Cato closed his left fist about the shaft and locked his arm. Then with his right he grasped the arrow a short distance further along. He tensed his muscles. 'Ready? On three.'

Macro nodded and looked up.

'One . . .' Cato suddenly snapped the shaft, and his friend roared with pain and glared wildly down from the saddle.

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'You cheating bastard, sir!'

Blood welled up from the end of the shaft embedded in Macro's thigh, and Cato hurriedly undid his neckcloth and tucked one end under the centurion's leg before he fed the rest of it around the limb, alternating to each side of the shaft and making the rough dressing as tight as he could. Dark stains appeared through the cloth as he tied it off, and he reached up. 'Give me yours.'

Macro undid the strip of cloth from around his thick neck, and Cato bound it over his own to complete the dressing. Despite the pressure, the wound was still bleeding, and he realised that Macro was losing too much blood, too quickly. He must get him back to the fort as soon as possible so that he could be treated by the garrison's surgeon.

'Miro! I want one of your men either side of the centurion. Keep him steady in his saddle.'

While the men moved into place, Macro shook his head. 'I don't need any bloody nursemaids. I'll make my own way.'

'Shut up, and do as you are told,' Cato snapped as he remounted. He took up his reins and looked up to see the boy some distance above them now. He had stopped to hurl insults down at the Romans, and his piercing voice echoed off the rocks. Soon the alarm would be raised in the settlement and they would be sure to come after the patrol. 'We have to get out of here.'

With a stab of anxiety, he saw that Macro was swaying slightly in his saddle, already light-headed from shock and the loss of blood. Then Cato's anxiety turned to fear. Fear that he might lose his closest friend in the world as a result of this absurd confrontation and the blind chance of the boy's second shot. The irony that Macro should be laid low by a skinny youth when he had bested some of the most formidable enemies of the empire was almost too much for Cato.

'Shit. Shit,' he muttered as he met his friend's wavering gaze. 'Not you. Not now. Not in this place.'

'No fucking way,' Macro growled back. 'Don't you worry about that, my lad.'

Cato nodded and then turned to Decurion Miro. 'Back to the fort! We stop for nothing. Let's go!'

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