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The Eagle's Prey

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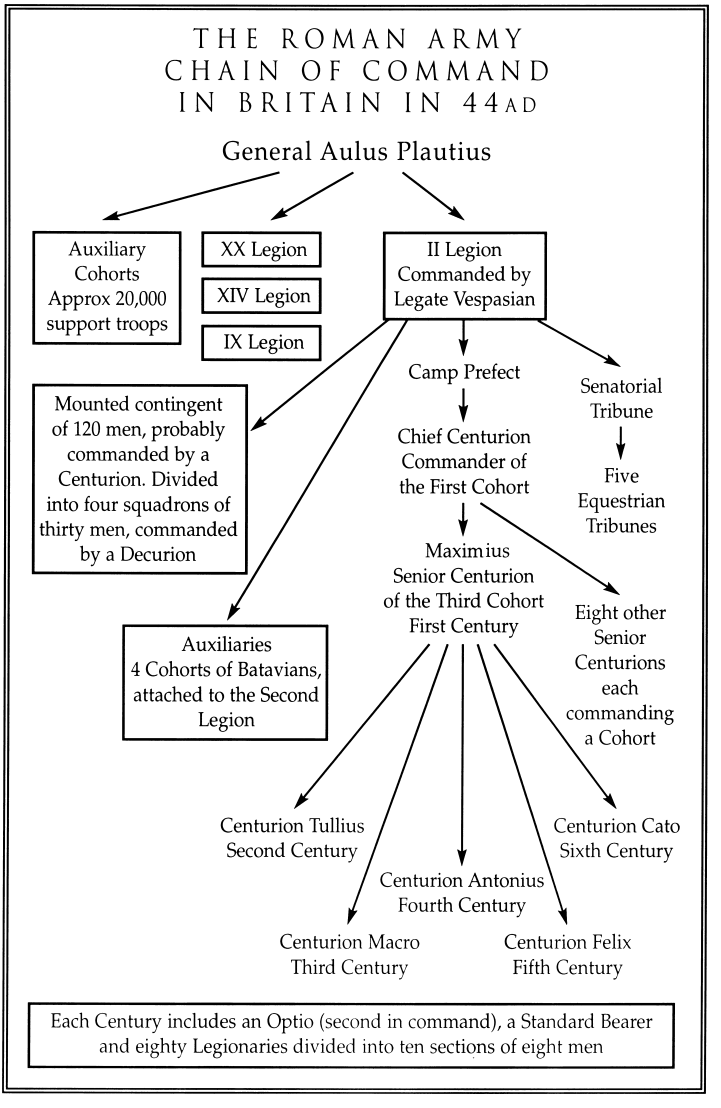
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THE ROMAN ARMY
CHAIN OF COMMAND
IN BRITAIN IN 44 AD
General Aulus Plautius
Auxiliary Cohorts Approx 20,000 support troops
XX Legion
XIV Legion
IX Legion
II Legion Commanded by Legate Vespasian
Mounted contingent of 120 men, probably commanded by a Centurion. Divided into four squadrons of thirty men, commanded by a Decurion
Camp Prefect
Chief Centurion Commander of the First Cohort
Senatorial Tribune
Five Equestrian Tribunes
Maximius Senior Centurion of the Third Cohort First Century
Eight other Senior Centurions each commanding a Cohort
Auxiliaries 4 Cohorts of Batavians, attached to the Second Legion
Centurion Tullius Second Century
Centurion Antonius Fourth Century
Centurion Cato Sixth Century
Centurion Macro Third Century
Centurion Felix Fifth Century
Each Century includes an Optio (second in command), a Standard Bearer and eighty Legionaries divided into ten sections of eight men

The Organisation of a Roman Legion

Centurions Macro and Cato are the main protagonists of *The Eagle's Prey*. In order to clarify the rank structure for readers unfamiliar with the Roman legions I have set out a basic guide to the ranks you will encounter in this novel. The Second Legion, the 'home' of Macro and Cato, comprised some five and a half thousand men. The basic unit was the century of eighty men led by a centurion with an optio acting as second in command. The century was divided into eight-man sections which shared a room together in barracks and a tent when on campaign. Six centuries made up a cohort, and ten cohorts made up a legion, with the first cohort being double-size. Each legion was accompanied by a mounted contingent of one hundred and twenty men, divided into four squadrons, who served as scouts and messengers. In descending order the main ranks of the legion were as follows:

The *legate* was a man from an aristocratic background. Typically in his mid-thirties, the legate would command the legion for up to five years and hope to make something of a reputation for himself in order to enhance his subsequent political career.

The *camp prefect* would be a grizzled veteran who would previously have been the chief centurion of the legion and was at the summit of a professional soldier's career. He would have vast experience and integrity, and to him would fall the command of the legion in the legate's absence.

Six *tribunes* served as staff officers. These would be men in their early twenties serving in the army for the first time to gain administrative experience before taking up junior posts in civil administration. The senior tribune was different. He came from a senatorial family and was destined for high political office and eventual command of a legion.

Sixty *centurions* provided the disciplinary and training back-

bone of the legion. They were hand-picked for their command qualities and a willingness to fight to the death. Accordingly their casualty rate far exceeded other ranks. The centurions were ranked by seniority based upon the date of their promotion. The most senior centurion commanded the First Century of the First Cohort and was a highly decorated and respected soldier.

The four *decurions* of the legion commanded the cavalry squadrons and hoped for promotion to the command of auxiliary cavalry units.

Each *centurion* was assisted by an *optio* who would act as an orderly, with minor command duties. Optios would be waiting for a vacancy in the centurionate.

The *legionaries* were men who had signed on for twenty-five years. In theory, a volunteer had to be a Roman citizen to qualify for enlistment, but recruits were increasingly drawn from provincial populations and given Roman citizenship on joining the legions.

Lower in status than the legionaries were the men of the *auxiliary cohorts*. They were recruited from the provinces and provided the Roman Empire with its cavalry, light infantry and other specialist arms. Roman citizenship was awarded on completion of twenty-five years of service, or as a reward for outstanding achievement in battle.

CHAPTER ONE

'How much further to the camp?' asked the Greek, looking back over his shoulder yet again. 'Will we reach it before dark?'

The decurion in charge of the small mounted escort spat out an apple seed and swallowed the sharp-tasting pulp before replying.

'We'll make it. Don't you worry, sir. Five or six miles, I reckon. That's all.'

'Can't we go faster?'

The man was still looking over his shoulder and the decurion could no longer resist the temptation to glance back along the track. But there was nothing to see. The route was clear all the way to the saddle nestling between two densely wooded hills that shimmered in the heat. They were the only people on the road, and had been since leaving the fortified outpost at noon. Since then the decurion, the ten mounted men of the escort he commanded, and the Greek with his two bodyguards, had been following the road towards the massive forward camp of General Plautius. There, three legions and a dozen auxiliary units were concentrated in order to strike a final decisive blow against Caratacus and his army of Britons, drawn from the handful of tribes still openly at war with Rome.

Quite what business this Greek had with the general was a

source of great curiosity for the decurion. At first light he had been ordered by the prefect of the Tungrian cavalry cohort to turn out the best men from his squadron and escort this Greek into the presence of the general. He did as he was told and asked no questions. But now, as he looked sidelong at the Greek, he was curious.

The man reeked of money and refinement, even though he wore a plain light cloak and a simple red tunic. His fingernails were carefully manicured, the decurion noted with distaste, and from the thinning dark hair and beard wafted the scent of an expensive citron pomade. There was no jewellery on his hands, but pale white bands showed that the Greek was accustomed to wearing a range of ostentatious rings. With a slight curl of his lip the decurion put the man down as one of those Greek freedmen who had wormed their way into the heart of the imperial bureaucracy. The fact that the man was now in Britain, and so obviously not trying to draw attention to himself, meant that he was on some detached duty of such sensitivity that the imperial courier system could not be trusted with the delivery of the message to the general.

The decurion subtly shifted his gaze to the two bodyguards riding immediately behind the Greek. They were equally plainly dressed and under their cloaks they carried short swords hanging from army-pattern baldrics. These were not the ex-gladiators that the most wealthy men of Rome preferred to employ as bodyguards. The swords and their bearing were a dead giveaway and the decurion recognised them for what they were: Praetorian Guardsmen, attempting – and failing – to go undercover. And they were the final proof that the Greek was here on imperial business.

The palace official looked back once again.

'Missing somebody?' asked the decurion.

The Greek glanced round, then suppressed his anxious

expression and forced a small smile on to his lips. 'Yes. At least I hope so.'

'Anybody I should be warned about?'

The Greek stared at him for a moment and then smiled again. 'No.'

The decurion waited for the man to elaborate but the Greek cut him dead and faced forward. Taking another bite of his apple the decurion shrugged and let his gaze wander across the surrounding countryside. To the south the upper reaches of the river Tamesis looped through the undulating landscape. Ancient woodlands hugged the tops of hills, while around them were dotted the small settlements and farms of the Dobunnian tribe – one of the first to pay homage to Rome when the legions had landed over a year earlier.

This would be a nice place to settle down, the decurion mused. Once he had served his twenty-five years and was awarded citizenship and a small gratuity, he would buy a farm on the edge of a veterans' colony and end his days in peace. He might even wed that native woman he had picked up in Camulodunum. Raise a few kids and drink himself silly.

The warm comfort of this reverie was interrupted as the Greek suddenly reined in and stared back down the track, brown eyes narrowed beneath his plucked brows. With a mouthed curse the decurion raised his arm to halt his men and then turned to his nervous charge.

'What now?'

'There!' The Greek pointed. 'Look there!'

The decurion wearily twisted on his saddle, the leather creaking under his riding breeches. For a moment he saw nothing; then as his gaze lifted to where the track disappeared over the hill he saw the dark silhouettes of horsemen flying from the shadows of the trees. Then they emerged into the sunlight, galloping straight towards the Greek and his escort.

'Who the hell are they?' the decurion muttered.

'I've no idea,' replied the Greek, 'but I think I know who sent them.'

The decurion glanced at him irritably. 'They're hostile?'

'Very.'

The decurion ran an experienced eye over their pursuers, now little more than a mile away: eight of them, their dark brown and black cloaks fluttering behind as they bent low over their mounts and urged them on. Eight against thirteen – not counting the Greek. Favourable odds, the decurion reflected.

'We've seen enough.' The Greek turned away from the distant horsemen and kicked his heels in. 'Let's go!'

'Forwards!' commanded the decurion, and the escort galloped after the Greek and his bodyguards.

The decurion was angry. There was no need to run like this. They had the advantage and could rest their mounts and wait for the pursuers to catch up, on blown horses. It would be over quickly enough. Then again, there was a vague chance that someone might get lucky and have a go at the Greek. The prefect's orders had been quite explicit: no harm must come to the Greek. His life must be protected at any cost. In that light, distasteful as it may be, the best thing to do was to stay out of harm's way, the decurion admitted. They had a mile's head start and would surely reach the general's camp long before the horsemen came within striking distance.

When he next looked over his shoulder the decurion was shocked to see how much closer the pursuers had come. They must be superbly mounted, he realised. His own horse, and those of his men, were as good as any in the cohort, but now they were wholly outclassed. And even then the pursuers would have to be fine riders to wring such performance out of them.

For the first time, the decurion was pricked by doubt. These were no mere brigands. Nor were they natives of this island, judging from their dark hair, swarthy complexions and flowing cloaks and tunics. Besides, Celtic tribesmen attacked Romans only when they heavily outnumbered them. Then again, the Greek seemed to know them. Even allowing for the timorousness of his race, the man's terror was palpable. Ahead of the decurion the Greek bounced up and down precariously on the back of his mount, while to each side his bodyguards rode their beasts with rather more style and confidence. The decurion's lips lifted in a wry grin around his gritted teeth. While the Greek might have acquitted himself well in the palace, he rode deplorably.

It wasn't long before the inevitable happened. With a sharp cry the Greek bounced too far to one side and despite a last desperate jerk of the reins his momentum hurled him from his saddle. Swearing, the decurion just managed to steer his beast to one side to avoid trampling the fallen man.

'Halt!'

With a chorus of curses and alarmed whinnying from the ponies, the escort drew up around the Greek, sprawled on his back.

'Bastard better not be dead,' the decurion grumbled as he swung himself down from the saddle. At once the two bodyguards were at his side, looming over the man whose life had been entrusted to them.

'Alive?' one muttered.

'Yes. He's breathing.'

The Greek's eyes flickered open, then he blinked them shut against the glare of the sun. 'What . . . what happened?' Then he slumped back, unconscious.

'Get him up!' the decurion snapped. 'Put him on his horse.'

The Praetorians heaved the Greek on his feet and slung him

back into the saddle before remounting. One took the Greek's reins while the other steadied the man with a firm grasp on his shoulder.

The decurion pointed up the track. 'Get him out of here!'

As the three men spurred towards the safety of the general's camp, the decurion swung himself back on to his mount and turned towards their pursuers.

They were much closer now, no more than three hundred paces away, and fanning out into a loose chevron as they charged towards the halted escort. Light javelins were snatched from their holsters and raised overhead, ready to throw.

'Form skirmish line!' the decurion bellowed.

His men eased their snorting ponies apart and extended across the track to face their pursuers, each man drawing his shield up to cover his body while his spare hand lowered the tip of his lance towards the rapidly approaching horsemen. The decurion wished he had thought to order his men to bring javelins with them, but he had expected an uneventful day's ride to the general's camp. Now they would have to weather the volleys of light javelins before they could close to tackle this enemy hand to hand.

'Ready!' the decurion called out to his men, giving them warning of his intention to attack. 'On my order . . . charge!'

With savage cries and frantic urging of their mounts the auxiliaries rippled forward, quickly picking up speed as the two small lines rushed towards each other.

The enemy horsemen showed no signs of slowing as they pounded up towards the auxiliaries. For an instant the decurion was certain that they would simply smash into his men at full tilt, and he braced himself for the impact. The impulse to recoil shivered along the ranks of his men and the line slowed down.

The decurion quickly recovered his wits and bellowed to each side, 'Keep going! Keep going!'

Ahead, the individual expressions of their pursuers could be made out: intent, silent and utterly remorseless. The flowing folds of their tunics and cloaks gave no hint of any armour beneath and the decurion almost pitied them, given the one-sided nature of the imminent clash. Man to man they could not hope to prevail against the better-protected auxiliary cavalrymen, regardless of the quality of their mounts.

At the last moment, without the need for any order, the enemy suddenly jerked their horses round and rode across the face of the Roman charge. Their javelin arms swept back.

'Look out!' cried one of the decurion's men as the several javelins swept in a low trajectory towards the escort party. This was no frantic flurry of missiles – each man had carefully picked his target – and the iron javelin heads thudded home into the chests and flanks of the cavalry mounts. Only one had struck a cavalryman, taking him low in the stomach just above the saddle horn. The targeting of their horses was quite deliberate, the decurion realised at once. Some reared up, thrashing their hoofs at the wounds, while others shied to one side with shrill whinnies of terror. Riders were forced to abandon the charge as they struggled to regain control of their beasts, and two men were thrown, crashing headlong on to the dried earth of the track.

More javelins darted through the air. The decurion's mount convulsed as a dark shaft slammed into its right shoulder. Instinctively clamping his thighs tightly to the leather saddle the decurion swore at his horse as it stopped and swung its head from side to side, sparkling flecks of saliva flying into the sunlight. Around him the rest of the escort milled about in a chaos of wounded animals and unhorsed men scrabbling to get clear of the panicked beasts.

A short distance off, the enemy had exhausted their javelins and now each man drew his sword, the long-bladed spatha that

was the standard issue for the cavalry of Rome. The odds had reversed and now the escort faced extinction.

'They're going to charge!' a terrified voice cried out close by the decurion. 'Run!'

'No! Stand together!' the decurion yelled, slipping off the back of his wounded mount. 'Run, and you're fucked! Close up! Close up on me.'

It was a futile order. With half his men on foot, some still dazed from their falls, and the rest struggling to control their mounts, a co-ordinated defence was impossible. It would be every man for himself. The decurion side-stepped into an open space to give himself room to wield his spear, and stared at the enemy trotting forward, swords levelled with deadly intent.

Then an order was shouted, in Latin. 'Leave them!'

The eight horsemen sheathed their blades and, with sharp tugs of the reins, they trotted round the wary circle of cavalrymen, then picked up speed and galloped down the track in the direction of the distant camp of the legions.

'Shit!' someone muttered with an explosive exhalation of relief. 'That was close. Thought they'd carve us up good and proper.'

The decurion instinctively shared the man's sentiment for a moment, before his guts turned to ice.

'The Greek . . . they're after the Greek.'

They'd catch him too. Despite the head start, his groggy condition would slow the Praetorians down, and long before they reached the safety of General Plautius and his army they would be overtaken and cut down.

The decurion cursed the Greek, and cursed his own bad fortune for having been charged with the man's protection. He snatched the reins of the horse belonging to the wounded soldier still struggling to draw the javelin out of his stomach.

'Get off!'

The man's face was clenched in agony and he seemed not to have heard the order, so the decurion thrust him from the saddle and swung himself up. There was a scream of agony as the wounded man thudded heavily to the ground, the shaft of the javelin snapping.

'Anyone with a horse, follow me!' the decurion shouted, wheeling his mount and spurring it after their attackers. 'Follow me!'

He leaned low, the mane of the pony flicking back against his cheek as the animal snorted and strained every sinew to obey the savage commands of its rider. The decurion glanced round and saw that four men had broken free of the others and were galloping behind him. Five against eight. Not good. But at least there would be no more javelins, and his shield and spear would give him the edge over any man armed only with a sword. So the decurion gave chase, his heart filled with a cold desire to have his revenge on these strangers, even as his mind was filled with the need to save the Greek who had brought all this upon them.

The track dropped down a gentle slope and three hundred paces ahead galloped the enemy. A third of a mile beyond them rode the Greek and his Praetorian bodyguards who were still struggling to hold the Greek up on his horse.

'Come on!' the decurion yelled over his shoulder. 'Keep up!'

The three groups of horsemen crossed the bottom of the vale and started up the opposite slope. The earlier exertion of the pursuers' mounts began to make itself apparent as the gap between them and the decurion closed. With a growing thrill of triumph he dug his heels in and shouted encouragement into the horse's ear. 'Come on! Come on, girl! One last effort!'

The gap had halved by the time the enemy had crested the hill and momentarily disappeared from view. The decurion

knew for certain that he and his men would catch them up before they could fall on the Greek and his Praetorians. He glanced back and his heart lifted to see his men close behind; he would not be riding into the enemy on his own.

As the track began to slope down, ahead, just over three miles away, the giant, sprawling square of the general's camp was visible. Intricate grids of minute tents filled the vast space bounded by the turf wall and ramparts. Three legions and several auxiliary cohorts, some twenty-five thousand men, were massing to advance, find and destroy the army of Caratacus and his British warriors. The spectacle had only a moment to impress itself upon the decurion before his view was filled with horsemen charging back along the track towards him. There was no time to rein in and let his men catch him up, and the decurion quickly raised his oval shield and lowered the tip of his spear, sighting it towards the centre of the nearest man's chest.

Then he was in amongst them, the shock of impact throwing his arm back, twisting his shoulder painfully. The shaft of the spear was ripped from his fingers and he heard the deep grunt of the man he had struck as the enemy passed by in a whirl of flowing capes and horse manes and tails. A sword blade thudded against his shield, clattering off the brass boss before it laid open his calf. Then the decurion was through them. He yanked the reins to one side and drew his sword. A sharp clatter of weapons and cries announced the arrival of the rest of his men.

Sword held high, the decurion charged into the mêlée. His men were fighting desperately, outnumbered two to one. As they fended off one attack they made themselves vulnerable to the next, and by the time their commander rejoined them, two were already down, bleeding on the ground beside the writhing form of the man the decurion had speared.

He sensed a movement to his left and ducked his helmet

just as the edge of a sword cut through the metal rim of his shield. The decurion jerked his shield to the side, trying to tear the sword out of his opponent's hand, at the same time swinging his sword in a wide are as he twisted to face the man. The blade flashed, the man's eyes widened as he apprehended the danger and he threw his body back. The point ripped through his tunic, grazing his chest.

'Shit!' the decurion spat, nudging the flanks of his mount to edge closer to his foe for the backswing cut. The intent to finish the man blinded him to danger from another direction, and so he never saw the dismounted figure rush up to his side and thrust a sword towards his groin. He just sensed the blow, like a punch, and by the time he had turned back the man had leaped away, his sword stained crimson. The decurion realised at once that that was his blood, but there was no time to check the wound. A glimpse revealed that he was the only one of his men left. The others were already dead or dying, at a cost of only two of these strange, silent men who fought as if they were born to it.

Hands grabbed his shield arm, and the decurion was hauled savagely from his saddle and crashed down on to the hard earth of the track, the air driven from his lungs. As he lay on his back, winded and looking up into blue heavens, a dark silhouette came between him and the sun. The decurion knew this was the end, but refused to close his eyes.

His lips curled into a sneer. 'Go on then, you bastard!'

But there was no sword thrust. The man just whirled away and was gone. Then scuffling sounds, horses snorting, the pounding of hoofs, which quickly receded, and the strangely serene sounds of a summer afternoon. The shimmering drone of insects was punctuated only by the agonised groans of a man in the grass nearby. The decurion was shocked that he was still alive, that the enemy had spared him even as he lay defenceless

on the ground. He struggled to draw breath, easing himself up into a sitting position.

The six surviving horsemen had renewed their pursuit of the Greek and a bitter rage welled up in the decurion. He had failed. Despite the sacrifice of the escort these strangers would still catch up with the Greek, and he could already imagine the harsh dressing-down he would receive when he, and what was left of the escort, limped back into the cohort's fort.

The decurion suddenly felt dizzy and nauseous, and he had to put a hand on the ground to steady himself. The earth felt warm and sticky and wet beneath his fingers. He looked down and saw that he was sitting in a puddle of blood. His blood, he dimly realised. Then he was aware of the wound in his groin again. A major artery had been severed and dark blood pulsed out in jets on to the grass between his splayed legs. At once he clamped a hand over the injury but the warm flow pressed urgently against the palm and squirted through the gaps between his fingers. He felt cold now, and with a sad smile he knew that there was no longer any danger of being bawled out by the prefect of the cohort. Not in this life, at least. The decurion looked up, and focused on the tiny figures of the Greek and his bodyguards fleeing for their lives.

The seriousness of their plight no longer affected him. They were mere shadows, dimly flickering across the edge of his dwindling senses. He slumped back on the grass and stared into the clear blue sky. All the sounds of the recent skirmish had faded; all that remained was the drowsy hubbub of insects. The decurion closed his eyes and let the warmth of the summer afternoon wash over him as his consciousness gradually ebbed away.