

Herod's Eyes

Excerpt 3

The Romans smashed brutally into the Breuci horde, pushing forward with their tough rectangular shields, stabbing through the gaps with their gladii. The cohesion of their enemy slackened as the Romans pushed forward, creating masses of dead. The Breuci fought back valiantly, but their numbers could no longer be concentrated. The Romans, although sustaining losses, pushed hard against their foemen. They were getting closer to us now, and details were easier to see, when the small wind shoved the dust aside. Through a clear patch, we saw a tall Breuci, perhaps a chieftain, jump toward the Romans and tear at their shields with his bare hands. He pulled over two legionaries in this manner, allowing men behind him to shoot arrows into the massed Romans, before he was cut down by swift hacks from Roman swords, as reserves filled the space he had made. Unengaged Romans appeared to the right, angling their formation into the valley, and sealing it, along with their cavalry and deployed Scordisci riders. The valley was closed in that direction.

To the left, in the near distance, the Breuci appeared to score a minor breach in the Roman lines, which was quickly repaired. The Romans pushed on. When tired or wounded, a squad would disengage. Back-up troops would instantly replace them so they could catch their breath, and, if needed, be treated by the excellent Roman military physicians.

“Get ready,” I told Sedic. “It won’t be long, now.”

He ordered six nimble young men to scamper down the lines, to the sounders of the sacred horns the Celts would not name, but which the Romans dubbed the *carnyx*.

The noise of battle was now overwhelming with the clang of swords, and the butting of shields. Above all was the roar of shouts and calls, curses, and screams. A bass line of groans from the wounded and moans from the frightened underlay everything. The smells were all there, too. You could drown in the odors of feces and blood, and the reek of fear and sweat. All senses were conjoined and melded as the fighting approached, the Breuci valiantly, but vainly, trying to stop the relentless Roman advance.

In the Breuci army, a decision was made. Perhaps the decision-maker was a great chief, perhaps it was simply a pre-arranged tactic. In any event, up reared brass horns, towering over the fighters, open-mouthed animal heads capping the instruments; the Breuci had *carnyces* of their own. A sudden loud, penetrating blare repeated and echoed

through the Breuci horde, a plainsong of brass horns. The host of Celtic warriors did what we ultimately expected them to do, and began to recoil from the Romans, to disengage and flow back, downhill.

The Breuci had clearly seen their fate was out of their hands in direct combat. Their losses were heavy, but their pride was intact, along with the bulk of their force. They obviously knew, however, that the Romans were also approaching from their right flank down the valley. It was clear they could not retreat the way they came, as that would take too long, and the Roman legions would be on top of them before the maneuver could be executed. After a moment of milling and seeming confusion, they did precisely what any body of sane warriors would do: they started to retreat, directly away from the Roman line, and into what they thought was the shelter of the forest. They came straight at us.