

**The Roxolan Princess**  
**Short Story by Gabriel Szeitz**

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**Also by Gabriel Szeitz:**  
**[Carol \(A deniable novel\)](#)**

**Content:**

***Geta Barba***

**The Queen**

**The White Owl**

**Glossary**

**The Author**

**Genesis**

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## THE ROXOLAN PRINCESS

"So bad weather," the Centurion complains.

The men are starving. From *Ala Quinta Porolissensis* are a few scattered remnants. They had to eat the horses. The Legion is well disciplined, but the Barbarians are different. They are brave, no doubt about it. The *Daci* are daemons in fight. They slash the enemy smiling and so they die.

"Decurion, who's in command?"

"*Geta Barba*, Centurion."

The Centurion didn't talk much. The silence is a virtue. The men from *Latium* don't talk. That's for Greeks to do. *Latini* fight and celebrate their Gods. *Geta Barba* is in command of what is left from *Ala Quinta*. A barbarian. An ugly hirsute barbarian, the best horseman they have.

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# 01 THE ROXOLAN PRINCESS GETA BARBA

When the General died, *Barba* was there. The proud guardsmen died one by one, throwing themselves in front of the treacherous spears. Their square iron shields were too heavy. The Roxolans attacked in gallop, throwing the short spears from close range, then ran back, reloaded and attacked again. They drove the horses in circle and kept launching projectile after projectile, aiming for the high ground, for the commanding officers. An iron tipped *pillum*, thrown at the horse's speed was as devastating as a ballista spear. It could shatter a wooden shield as easy as a catapult and yet skew the soldier like a pigeon.

*Geta* was far away, at the other end of the battlefield. He and his horsemen were chasing the slingers. Easy equipped, they were fast as deer. The slingers launched their projectiles from the edge of the forest. When the cavalry approached, the Roxolans ran between the trees, hiding in the forest. The thick bushes made the advance of the horses nearly impossible. A horseman without speed is a bird without wings. *Geta* understood the danger and ordered his men to retreat in open space. They lost a few, but the enemy artillery line was broken.

*Geta* knew well this forest fight. At home, his kin fought the same war. The emperor Domitianus almost died in there. His humiliated army escaped over Donaris in a chaotic rush. The peace treaty was a shame for the Romans. The two legions were decimated and *Ala Secunda Thracica* disbanded in dishonor. About the *Cohors Tertia Britannica* it was no sign: the archers perished all together in the woods. But that was long ago, when *Barba* had a home.

*Geta* ordered an easy fan of cavalry along the forest line. That should be enough to keep the light artillery at distance. If the Roxolan slingers couldn't join in compact formation, their projectiles rendered inefficient.

"Zapyrion, bring the fire!" he ordered.

The *Dacus* foamed his small fast horse to the Legion's camp. The engineers had built there a wooden cabin. The precious Greek fire was stored inside, in clay jugs. While his men spread along the forest line, *Geta* took the main body of his *Ala* and ordered wing formation. Zapyrion came back at the utmost speed, the pin in the horse's mouth bloodied.

"Share the jugs! Burn the forest!" *Geta* shouted, turning his horse. He positioned himself in the tip of the wing. "Fast my braves! We can die only once."

The cavalry formation speeded to the middle of the battlefield. One flank was secured. Somehow, the heavy Roxolan infantry managed to find a weakness in the Roman dispositive. The Legion was separated of its commanding officer. The General was forced toward the other side of the battlefield, while the Roman infantry was pinned down with terrible battle axe blows. The loss of men was heavy, and their advance stalled. The guard and the General were drifting further away. *Geta* has seen the white hot point and led his galloping fury right in the middle of the Roxolan, surprising them from the back. The ram horns festooned helmets flew rolling on the ground. Launched at full speed against the infantrymen, the horses were crashing bodies in piles. The boar and mutton pelts soaked in blood. The Roxolans were not kittens either. With demented courage, they enter under the *Daci* horses and cut the bellies open.

*Geta's* horse collapsed with the intestines aground. The horse screamed too. The agony shrieks sounded all over the battlefield. Roaring like a wounded bear, *Geta* hit the Roxolan with his curved sword. The bronze rattled against the bronze, sword against axe. Again and again, *Geta* attacked. The loss of his horse blinded him with red fury. The sword broke. He continued the assault with his fists. Without shield, he was faster than the Roxolan. He was panting and spitting blood: when fell off the horse, his lips splintered. The Roxolan responded with a crushing blow, but he cannot match *Geta's* agility. Nobody could. Catching him off balance, *Barba* steps laterally, grabbed the enemy's wooden shield, and forced it in a circular move. The Roxolan's arm was stuck in the holding straps. He cannot liberate it, and the limb broke with a creaking sound, from the shoulder's articulation. The Barbarian howled first in pain, then in terror. *Geta* carried his crippled body to the horse's carcass. Despite the cold air, dark blood gushed from the horse's guts. *His* horse guts. *Geta* blew the enemy's helmet with a vicious kick.

Grabbing him from the back of the head, he buried the Roxolan's face in the streaming blood. The horse's hoofs were still trembling spasmodically. So did the Barbarian's limbs. Roxolan and horse died together in a hoax of guts and oozing blood.

Seeing his general in great danger, *Geta* didn't hesitate. The sweat ran in his eyes in stinging streams. He tore the open the leather strip and flung the helmet. *A dead man doesn't need a helmet*, he thought. His braves had been killed almost to the last. From one hundred and fifty proud nobles sons were still standing maybe forty. He collected a spear. A heavy one, used against cavalry. He balanced the weapon and threw it. The barbed iron mauled. His target collapsed. He armed a shield and a battle axe, attacking blindly, mourning his horse. He hit with the shield and with the axe. Upon the circumstances, he hit with his head, his elbows, his knees, his shoulders and his heels. *Barba's* advance was a path paved with broken necks and shattered teeth. He got hurt several times, superficially. His blood mixed with the Roxolan blood all over his chest.

"He's possessed," the Centurion said. He knew about that. Homer spoke about it also, but the Centurion had seen it on the battlefield. The God of War descended upon *Geta*. He was unstoppable. Each single blow he unleashed was deadly. The enemy's projectiles were missing him as he moved like the wing of death. No man could stand his fury. That rush finished always with the soldier dead, the Centurion knew. When Mars will retire, as subtly as he came, the man will be, too exhausted to live. The Roxolans drifted back, and then ran for their life. The General had a couple guards left: two *Decuriones*. Their red plums over the shiny helmets were blown by the cold wind.

And there she came. Out of the mist, a light two wheels chariot was eating distance in huge gulps. Moving at lightning speed over the snow, she drove her horses: a pack of four black stallions with svelte legs. She tensed the bow. The arrow flew whistling and one Decurion died, blood splashed from his neck. The black horses galloped ahead. Their silver battle masks shone in front of the blinded eyes. The bow's string tensed. The arrow flew. Straight in the eye. The last Decurion collapsed, facing the gray sky. The horses ran. The General stood alone, his heavy purple cloak moving slightly. He stood straight in face of death.

"Braves! Charge!"

*Geta* organized together his few standing braves, those left behind by the forest line. Their horses were chewing bloody foam. In the right, Bardanes' stallion stumbled

in its knees. *Geta Barba* bent over his horse neck. The wind whistled at his bare ears. *Daci* charged. The chariot turned in a tight circle. At the legs of the archer Queen, a wolf stood guard, snarling its teeth. The eyes were red blood and golden amber. *A Priestess of the Wild*. He pushed the horse even faster. *Barba* had killed bears with bare hands before. Turning the bow over the left shoulder, the Queen unleashed a last arrow. The chariot stumbled, the black horses were steaming. The chest of his horse was by Queen's back. *Barba* almost could grab her luxuriant reddish hair. The grey wolf has bitten the air, and then the horse. The blood ran free over the snow. He flung the axe and he missed. The bronze hit the neck of the leading black horse and the chariot went running even faster. His horse was an open wound, the neck's skin torn by the guarding wolf. He had to stop.

The Romans won, but they paid dearly. The last arrow Queen aimed hurt the general in his shoulder. It wasn't critical, they thought. Few good horses were left. The Legion was crushed and almost all the officers were dead. Their helmets' plums made good targets. His *Ala* ceased to exist. One hundred twenty of his men he drove to death. *Barba* kneeled and howled. He was mourning his braves. The warriors don't cry: they're cursing God. He grabbed a bow and unleashed arrows to the sky:

"Zamolxis! Give back my sons! Give back my braves!" he ordered his God.

The General was watching incredulous. This man has killed heaps of Roxolans today. He saved a Legion commander's life. And now he wanted to fight his God.

"Mars, give me one thousand men like this: I'll conquer the world," the General mumbled to his own god. He had fought in Britannia, in Gallia and in Africa. He had won land from treacherous Germans in North bush by bush and tree by tree. He had paid every hill he conquered with Roman blood. He had seen warriors before. But not like this.

"*Barba!*" he called the *Geta*.

"General!"

"They fought bravely, *Barba!* They're banqueting with Mars right now."

"They did. They were my sons. The noblest of my kin."

"And you, *Barba*, you won the day for us."

"Don't insult me, General. From all my men, I was the worst."

"That's not the truth. You won today."

“Count your fingers, General.”

“They’re ten.”

“And if until tonight your fingers will be cut but two? How do you clench your fists to fight?”

The General clenched his fists in the same night, in excruciating pain. The Queen’s arrow was poisoned. Before the sunrise he died. They burned his body in its purple cloak.

“Another one who goes to Mars.”

“So had to be. Your doctors are fools,” *Geta* said to Centurion, who took the command of the crushed Legion.

“We have no physicians left, *Barba*. I cared the wounds. How could I know it was a poisoned arrow?”

“You couldn’t, true. She’s a Priestess of the Wild, Centurion. She will summon all the beasts against us. You, Romans, you have to learn.”

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## 02 THE ROXOLAN PRINCESS THE QUEEN

The whistle of the Dacian flag is heard before the cavalry arrives. The flag is a wolf's head stuck in a golden spear, with open mouth. In the back of the head are sort of strings. When the wind blows thru the beast's mouth, the flag howls like alive. The *Daci* follow that flag and die for it as one. No human law can hold them aback, and sometimes no God's will.

"Centurion," they're coming.

The howl is closing in the thick mist. The Decurion's hand is groping for sword.

"Relax, Agrippa. If they wanted to kill you, you were ashes already."

As any good Roman, Agrippa doesn't trust the Barbarians. They are brave, but villainous and superstitious. So far, the *Daci* saved their lives many times, and kept them alive by hunting. The Romans fed into the *Daci* horses, until half of a dozen left.

The mist is blown by the wind in waves, and is thick like incense smoke. They can hear the jingle of the weapons, but not the horses. *Barba* ordered his men to wrap the hoofs in pelts. They were slower, but silent as the forest's spirits. Another sound accompanies the weapons' jingle. The Centurion cannot estimate what that could be. Six silhouettes protrude from the mists and then the seventh and the eighth one. As close as ten paces, the Roman can see. *Daci* bring with them a bull. There are three hundred soldiers to feed. And there is another rider: a woman.

"Centurion, the Queen." It's *Barba's* voice.

The woman is quite an apparition. She wears a lynx fur over her shoulders. The belt is as thick as a Decurion's. A short skirt stops over her knees. She's bare feet in the snow. On her head she wears a simple diadem, like a silver circle, embedded in her cranium. Under the ring's pressure, the skull had grown elongated like a pear. The thick

reddish hair is arranged in a sophisticated tail, long on her back. She has a white owl on the left shoulder and in the right hand she carries a scepter made of a large cat skull. It must be a lynx's. She sports no weapons.

The Queen steps forwards and stands two paces in front of the Centurion. She spits at his feet. The Decurion drags the sword. She shows no fear.

"She comes in peace, Agrippa," says *Barba*. "She greets the Centurion."

"She spat his sandals!"

"You see the owl? It's sign for wisdom. She's here to negotiate."

"She has to knee."

"But she's a Queen!"

"Nobody's king or queen in front of a Roman! We are the law!"

"Enough! Let her speak."

She speaks in hisses and interjections. She's ululating and she's dancing. She spits again at the Centurion's feet.

"What was that?"

"The Queen is asking us to leave her lands. Her tribe will give us food and horses. They will provide us a scout. The Romans have to swear not to cross the river again," translates *Barba*.

"That is an insult!"

"That's a hand for help, Centurion. We're starving. From three hundred soldiers we have left, maybe one hundred can hold the shields. She gives us food in the middle of the winter. Her tribe will starve after that: they aren't rich. And horses. This is a generous offer."

"We cannot promise we never return. The Roman Empire is the master of the world."

"Consider it, Centurion."

"Centurion, if we have to perish, we'll die with glory."

"There's no glory in starvation."

"Silence! *Barba*, ask her to pay tribute every year. And we shall go."

*Barba* hisses and interjects. The Queen listens and watches the ground, the sky and the surrounding forest. Everything is draped in thick mist. And then she answers.

“The Queen says they’re hunters. They cannot put tribute over the beasts, because the beasts are free. No bear had ever brought its clubs to feed the Roxolans. And so they are.”

“So, they refuse!”

The Queen propped her feet on the snow, arms crossed over breast. The eyes of the owl were closed.

“Ask her for a gesture of submission and we’ll leave.”

*Barba* hisses to the Queen. She doesn’t move. She stands.

“I’ll kill the witch!”

“No blood is needed, Decurion.”

“We built our power with blood. Every single brick of Rome’s walls is splattered with enemy blood.”

“*Barba*, make her understand we have our laws. We cannot obey and we cannot accept an unfair peace.”

“Unfair, you say?”

“This land is Roman!”

“This land has to be conquered first, Centurion.”

*Barba* had joined the Roman army on request and he was proud to be *Ala* commander in the mightiest army the world had ever seen. But a good general has to know when to sound the retreat as well as when to call the attack. And he understands this Queen. He was a Principe of his kin too, before the nobles stole his father’s scepter. This land is not Roman yet. They have to die for it first. And much more many after.

“Ask her!”

“I can’t. She’s a Queen. You don’t ask eagles to be chickens.”

“I am the *Legatus* of Roman Senate. There is no shame in kneeling in front of me.”

“The fox is rather eating her trapped foot than to fall to the hunter.”

The Centurion sighs:

“Decurion, make her leave. Men, prepare for dinner: we lift the camp in the morning.”

Two soldiers are sacrificing the bull. The Decurion approaches the Queen and he spits her.

“That’s for tarnishing the Roman uniform,” he says.

Perhaps she doesn’t know a word in Latin. The Queen stands, defiant. He pushes her. She stands. He hits her. She stands. He draws the sword. The Queen not even blinks. The cold breeze moves the tips of the owl’s wings. The Decurion smashes her cheek with the guard of the sword. Her head bumps backwards, but she keeps the stance.

“Enough, Decurion!”

“*Barba*, mind your business!”

“She is a Queen and a Priestess. You don’t know what are you doing, Agrippa.”

The Queen is singing now. An unheard, modulated howl. The Decurion steps back. He’s a little scared, but not enough to abandon the punishment.

“She’s talking to the wind.”

And the wind stops. The mist remains suspended in the air as a heavy curtain.

The Queen calls new sounds, as savage as the forest around.

“She’s talking to the trees.”

“She’s talking to my sword!” The Decurion trusts the *gladius* and open a huge wound in the woman’s belly. Her song doesn’t die. The owl moves with the torment but is not flying away, her claws firmly in its mistress lynx. The Decurion swing his sword once more. The queen’s body bends slightly under the blow, but she keeps standing. Her legs are covered in her own blood, and more blood soaks the snow, steaming, and then freezing. With a grunt, the Decurion hits again, aiming for heart. The owl opens its eyes like yellow embers, and flows on a tree. The queen collapses. Her crisped mouth is mumbling further.

“Witch!” the Decurion pants, wiping his sword on the priestess’s lynx. The owl watches, spinning its head.

“She cursed us.”

“Who cares? The Roman Gods are mightiest!”

“It could be so, Decurion, in Rome.”

The Decurion grunts again. He knows he’s right. There is no match for Jupiter and Mars. Mars can lead in fight hundreds of legions. What can do a cripple headed woman with a white owl? He spits.

The food is ready and is distributed by *decuriae*. The Centurion sits and eats his food in silence, among his men. Everybody is mute, gathered around small camp fires. They are exhausted and they are sick. *Geta* was right today. Barely can he summon one hundred worthy soldiers. And the fit ones are tired by caring the wounded. One has to work for three. The attrition is terrible in the frozen woods.

The *Daci* are sitting apart, whispering animatedly.

“They’re plotting, Centurion.”

“Maybe they’re respecting our silence.”

The Decurion grunts. The centurion must be naïve. Look at his beard: he doesn’t need to shave yet.

“*Barba!*”

The *ala* commander approaches, slowly, his silhouette massive against the dark sky.

“Centurion?”

“Decurion, we need some privacy.”

Agrippa grunts again, and sits away, but not too far.

“*Barba*, if your men want to go, they must. I understand their fears. The Decurion has killed a high rank Priestess of your kin. He had to do it, for Roman law. So, I’m freeing you of the bond to the Roman Empire. If you like to, you may go,” the Centurion whispers.

“Our word it’s not letter written on the water, Centurion. We have sworn loyalty or death. For what is good a man if he has no loyalty? Even a dog has it.”

“And your men? Free them!”

“They *are* free. They have chosen to fight along you, so they’ll do it. They’re talking of the curse. She laid a terrible curse over our heads.”

“What did she curse?”

“The ground will swallow you, Romans. And us, for obeying your rule.”

“That’s it?”

*Barba* stares at his Centurion warily.

“I mean, it that a lot for you?”

“That means all for us, Centurion. If we die fighting, we are happy. We meet our ancestors in the sky and we drink wine in endless cups and we eat game meat in endless skewers. And we have pure women every time.”

The Centurion remains silent. Superstition. There is no life after death. When your body dies, so does the soul. And your ashes flow in the wind: end.

“If the ground eats you, you will remain with the worms. No fighting man of my kin wants to be a sightless worm.”

“They will not!”

*Barba* is shaking his head in disbelief. He looks resigned to his fate. The Centurion cannot understand: this man was throwing arrows against his God a week ago. And now he’s concerned by a howling woman’s curse. And he really thinks the ground will open and will swallow them.

“Men, sleep!” the Decurion’s order resounds in the cold night. “*Vigila prima!*”

The legionnaires spread to their tents. Twenty eight tents, the Centurion counts. *We’re not even three hundred. Daci* are sleeping outside, with their horses, wrapped in wolf furs. Only *Barba* has a huge bear pelt. The legends around are saying he had killed the bear by breaking its jaw in a bare hands clash. No man can do that, the Centurion thinks.

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## 03 THE ROXOLAN PRINCESS THE WHITE OWL

The horn blows over the frozen camp.

“Let’s go men!” the Decurion is yelling. “We’re lifting the camp. Legionnaires lift the tents! Twenty five tents, no more. *Cohors Prima*, prepare the arson. *Cohors Secunda*, secure the loads. Let’s push, men. There are still bars open in Rome!”

Usually the soldiers would be cheering when they receive the order to lift the camp for retreat. But not this time. The sun sends blinding reflexes over the frozen camp. A flock of ravens is splotching the trees with black. One more horse died over night of exhaustion and cold. Eighteen more soldiers failed to report. Four of the horses are taken by *Cohors Secunda* to pull the two heavy carts. The dead horse is butchered and packed for the next meal. The fifth is another walking meal. Whatever they cannot take along anymore, the Romans gather in a large pile and set the fire. No useful item should fall in enemy’s hands regardless if is a ballista or a dented chamber pot. The *Daci* are watching. They hate their horses in a yoke. But they’re dead, anyhow. The Barbarians are not helping. *Daci* are always carrying everything with them, riding or on foot.

The Centurion waits for his tent to be removed. He sent his stool and his pillows to the burning pile. The campaign’s papyri are sealed in large amphorae and loaded in the carts. With so many things to be abandoned, the fire is huge. *Cohors Prima* is destroying whatever cannot be burnt. At the end they cremate the dead soldiers, to protect them of desecration. It is almost midday when they finish.

“Legion, in march formation! *Centuria Prima*, avant-garde! *Centuria Secunda*, guard the chariots. *Cohors Prima*, *Cohors Secunda*, rotate the loads! *Cohors Tertia*, rearguard.” The column is forming fast. They are veterans. Only *Centuria Secunda* is

carrying spears. All the others hold only the *gladius* and the square shield. No order comes for the *Daci*. As *Barba* stated, they are free men. Loyal free men.

“*Centuria Prima*... Easy march, hay!”

“Hay!” the hundred men answer in the same time. One hundred right feet move forward simultaneously. Then one hundred left feet. The shields are rattling in the same rhythm. *Barba* have seen this one thousand times: he’s still impressed by the Roman marching formation. Ten *decuriae*, one *centuria*. One hundred men, arranged ten by ten, in a perfect square. They’re ready to fight in every moment, just turning right or left. The Decurion counts one hundred paces:

“*Centuria Secunda*... Easy march, hay!”

“Hay!”

“*Cohors Prima*, push!”

“Hay!”

The auxiliaries are pushing the heavy carts, helping the horses. The men and horses are working together. Otherwise, the horses will collapse after two hundred paces. Steam is jetting out from the horses’ dilated nostrils. Slowly, the whole column moves. *Daci* stick with the middle of the column. They were not assigned, but their horses are there. The Centurion hurries forward, joining *Centuria Prima*. The Decurion leads the rearguard. Although they suffered such big losses in the command chain, the Centurion didn’t assigned grades. One commander was enough for less than three hundred men. In *decuriae*, the first man acts as Decurion. The only Decurion that survived leads *Centuria Tertia*. *Centuria Secunda*, in the middle, has no leader, but *Barba* acts as *Legatus Centurionis*. The Centurion didn’t want to insult the other Romans, giving *Geta* a rank. But he knows that, if somebody deserves it, the hirsute bear is the one. He’s strong, he’s courageous and, in top of all, he’s wise.

The column moves slowly thru the valley for couple of days. They ate the last unemployed horse. *Daci* went hunting, but without success. The beasts are not hiding so low in the forest. Only the ravens are following them all along the slow path. They’re losing one *decuria* per day to attrition. But is going to be worst. The legionnaires don’t complain. *They are brave too*, *Barba* has to admit. Holding the chariots not to slide down the slopes is even more difficult than pushing them. Half of the auxiliaries are injured, but they carry on, towing the carts in common effort with the animals.

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