

The Silver Eagle

BEN KANE



preface

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Chapter I: The Mithraeum



Eastern Margiana, winter 53/52 BC

A good mile from the fort, the Parthians finally came to a halt. When the steady crunch of boots and sandals on frosty ground ceased, an overwhelming silence descended. Quiet coughs and the jingle of mail fell away, absorbed by the freezing air. Darkness had not quite fallen, allowing Romulus to take in their destination: a nondescript cliff face of weathered, grey-brown rocks which formed the end of a range of low hills. Peering into the gathering gloom, the powerfully built young soldier tried to see what had brought the warriors here. There were no buildings or structures in sight, and the winding path they had been following appeared to come to a dead end at the cliff's foot. Raising an eyebrow, he turned to Brennus, his friend and surrogate father. 'What in Jupiter's name are we doing here?'

'Tarquinius knows something,' grunted Brennus, hunching his great shoulders under his thick military cloak. 'As usual.'

'But he won't tell us!' Romulus cupped his hands and blew on them, trying to prevent his fingers and face from going completely numb. His aquiline nose already was.

'It'll come out eventually,' the pigtailed Gaul replied, chuckling.

Romulus' protest died away. His eagerness would not speed things up. Patience, he thought.

Against their skin, the two men wore cloth jerkins. Over these, standard issue mail shirts. While affording good protection against blades, the heavy iron rings constantly drained away their body heat. Woollen cloaks and scarves and the felt liners under their bronze bowl crested helmets helped a little, but their calf-length russet trousers and heavy studded *caligae*, or sandals, exposed too much flesh to allow any comfort.

‘Go and ask him,’ urged Brennus with a grin. ‘Before our balls drop off.’

Romulus smiled.

They had both demanded an explanation from the Etruscan haruspex when he’d appeared in their fuggy barrack room a short time earlier. Typically, Tarquinius gave away little, but he had muttered something about a special request from Pacorus, their commander. And the chance of seeing if there was a way out of Margiana. Unwilling to let their friend go off alone, the pair also jumped at the chance of some information.

The last few months had provided a welcome break from the constant fighting of the previous two years. Gradually, however, their life in a Roman fort turned into a numbing routine. Physical training followed guard duty; the repair of equipment replaced parade drill. Occasional patrols provided little in the way of excitement. Even the tribes which raided Margiana did not campaign in winter weather. Tarquinius’ offer therefore seemed heaven-sent.

Yet Romulus’ purpose tonight was more than simple thrill-seeking. He was desperate for even the briefest mention of Rome. The city of his birth now lay on the other side of the world, with thousands of miles of harsh landscape and hostile peoples in between. Was there any chance he might return there one day? Like nearly all his comrades, Romulus dreamt of that possibility day and night. Here, at the ends of the earth, there was nothing else to hold on to, and this unexplained excursion might provide a sliver of hope.

‘I’ll wait,’ he replied at length. ‘After all, we volunteered to come.’ He stamped resignedly from foot to foot. Suspended by a leather carrying strap, his elongated oval shield, or *scutum*, swung off his shoulder with the movement. ‘And you’ve seen the mood Pacorus is in. He’d probably cut my balls off for just asking. They’re better freezing.’

A laugh rumbled in Brennus’ throat.

Short and swarthy, Pacorus was at the head of the party, dressed in a richly decorated jerkin, trousers and ankle boots, with a conical Parthian hat and a long bearskin cloak to keep him warm. Under the fur, a delicate gold belt circling his waist had two curved daggers and a jewel-hilted sword slung from it. A brave but ruthless man, Pacorus led the Forgotten Legion, the remnants of a huge Roman army defeated the previous summer by the

Parthian general Surena. Together with Tarquinius, the friends were now merely three of its rank-and-filers.

Once more, Romulus was a captive.

It was ironic, he thought, that his life should be spent exchanging one master for another. First it had been Gemellus, the brutal merchant who owned his entire family – Velvinna, his mother, Fabiola, his twin sister, and himself. Falling on hard times, Gemellus had sold Romulus at thirteen to Memor, the *lanista* of the Ludus Magnus, Rome's largest gladiator school. Although less casually cruel than Gemellus, Memor's sole business was training slaves and criminals to fight and die in the arena. Men's lives meant nothing to him. At that memory, Romulus spat. To survive in the *ludus*, he had been forced to end a man's life. More than once. *Kill or be killed*: Brennus' mantra rang in his ears.

Romulus checked that his short, double-edged *gladius* was loose in its scabbard, that the bone-handled dagger on the other side of his belt was ready for use. The actions were second nature to him now. A grin creased his face as he caught Brennus doing the same. Like all Roman soldiers, they also carried two iron-headed javelins, or *pila*. Their companions, a score of Pacorus' best warriors, stood in marked contrast to them. Clad in simpler versions of their senior's clothing, and with slit-sided woollen cloaks rather than a thick fur one, each man was armed with a long knife and a slim case which hung from his right hip. This was large enough to carry his recurved composite bow and a supply of arrows. Proficient with many weapons, the Parthians were first and foremost a nation of highly skilled archers. It was fortunate that he had met none of them in the arena, thought Romulus. All were able to loose half a dozen shafts in the time a man could run a hundred paces. And every one accurate enough to kill.

Fortunately, the *ludus* was also where he had met Brennus. Romulus threw him a grateful look. Without the Gaul's friendship, he would have soon succumbed to the savage life. Instead, over two years had passed with only a single life-threatening injury. Then, late one night, a street brawl had gone horribly wrong and the friends had had to flee Rome together. Joining the army as mercenaries, the general Crassus had become their new master. Politician, millionaire and member of Rome's ruling triumvirate, he was desperate for the military recognition possessed by his two colleagues, Julius Caesar and Pompey Magnus. Arrogant fool, thought

Romulus. If he'd been more like Caesar, we'd all be home by now. Instead of fame and glory, Crassus led thirty-five thousand men to a bloody, ignominious defeat at Carrhae. The survivors – about one-third of the army – had been taken prisoner by the Parthians, whose brutality outstripped even that of Memor. Given the stark choices of having molten gold poured down their throats, being crucified or serving in a border force on Parthia's unsettled eastern frontier, Romulus and his comrades had naturally chosen the last.

Romulus sighed, no longer so sure that their choice had been correct. It seemed they would spend the rest of their lives fighting their captors' historical enemies: savage nomadic tribes from Sogdia, Bactria, and Scythia.

He was here to find out if that miserable fate could be avoided.

Tarquinius' dark eyes scanned the rock face.

Not a sign.

Differing in appearance to all the others, Tarquinius had long, blond locks held in place by a cloth band, which revealed a thin face, high cheekbones and a single gold earring in his right ear. The Etruscan wore a hide breastplate covered with tiny interlinked bronze rings; a centurion's short leather-bordered skirt completed his attire. From his back hung a small, worn pack. Over his left shoulder, a double-headed battleaxe dangled from a strap. Unlike his companions, the *haruspex* had scorned a cloak. He wanted his senses to be on full alert.

'Well?' demanded Pacorus. 'Can you see the entrance?'

A slight frown creased Tarquinius' brow, but he did not reply. Long years of training under Olenus, his mentor, had taught him great patience. To others, it often looked like smugness.

The commander's eyes flickered off to the right.

Tarquinius deliberately glanced the other way. Mithras, he thought, Great One. Show me your temple.

Pacorus could no longer contain himself. 'It's not even thirty paces away,' he taunted.

Several of his warriors sniggered.

Casually, Tarquinius let his gaze slide over to where the commander had looked a moment before. He stared long and hard at the cliff, but could see nothing.

‘You’re a charlatan. I always knew it,’ snarled Pacorus. ‘It was a complete mistake to let you become a centurion.’

It was as if the Parthian had forgotten how he, Tarquinius, had provided the Forgotten Legion with its secret weapon, thought the haruspex bitterly. A ruby gifted to him years ago by Olenus had bought the silk which even now covered more than five thousand men’s *scuta*, giving them the ability to withstand arrows from the previously all-powerful recurved bows. It had been his idea to have thousands of long spears forged, weapons which could keep any cavalry at bay. It was thanks to him that the massive Sogdian war band devastating towns in Margiana upon their arrival had been annihilated. In addition, his medical expertise had saved the lives of numerous injured soldiers. His promotion to centurion was a tacit acknowledgement of this, and of Tarquinius’ esteemed status among the ranks. Yet still he dared not answer back.

Pacorus held all of their lives in the palm of his hand. Until now what had protected Tarquinius, and to an extent his friends, from torture or death was the commander’s dread of his prophetic abilities. And, for the first time in the Etruscan’s life, these had deserted him.

Fear – a new emotion – became Tarquinius’ daily companion.

For months, he had existed on his wits, while seeing nothing of real significance. Tarquinius studied every cloud, every gust of wind and every bird and animal he saw. Nothing. Sacrifices of hens and lambs, normally an excellent method of divining, had repeatedly proved fruitless. Their purple livers, the richest source of information in all of haruspicy, yielded no clues to him. Tarquinius could not understand it. I have been a haruspex for nearly twenty years, he thought sourly. Never has there been such a drought of visions. The gods must truly be angry with me. Charon, the Etruscan demon of the underworld, came to mind, emerging from the earth to swallow them all. Blue-skinned and red-haired, he walked in Pacorus’ shadow, his mouth full of slavering teeth ready to tear Tarquinius apart when the commander’s patience reached its limit. Which would not take long. One did not need to be a haruspex to read Pacorus’ body language, reflected Tarquinius wearily. He was like a length of wire stretched so taut it would break any moment.

‘By all that is sacred,’ Pacorus snapped, ‘let me show you.’ Grabbing a torch from a guard, he led the way. The whole party followed. Just twenty steps on, he stopped. ‘Look,’ he ordered, jabbing forward the flame.

Tarquinius' eyes opened wide. Directly in front lay a neat area of evenly cut paving stones. In the centre was a large, man-made opening in the ground. Heavy slabs of rock had been laid down to form a square hole. Their weathered surfaces were covered with inscriptions and etchings. Tarquinius stepped closer to see, recognising the shapes of a raven, a crouching bull and an ornate seven-rayed crown. Was that outline a Phrygian cap? It was similar to the blunt-peaked hats worn by haruspices since the dawn of time, he thought with a thrill of excitement. This tiny detail was intriguing, because it was a possible link to the uncertain origins of Tarquinius' people.

Before they had colonised central Italy many centuries previously, the Etruscans had journeyed from the east. Traces of their civilisation existed in Asia Minor, but legend had it that they came from much further away. As did Mithras. Few things excited Tarquinius, but this did. Years of his life had been spent searching for evidence of the Etruscans' past, with little success. Perhaps now, here in the east, the impenetrable mist of time was beginning to thin. Olenus had been correct – again. The old man had predicted he might find out more by journeying to Parthia and beyond.

'Normally, only believers may enter a Mithraeum,' Pacorus announced. 'The penalty for trespassing is death.'

His pleasure quickly dissipating, Tarquinius grimaced. Any information about Mithraicism came second to surviving.

'You are being allowed inside in order to foretell my future and that of the Forgotten Legion,' said Pacorus. 'If your words are unconvincing, you will die.'

Controlling his emotions, Tarquinius regarded him steadily. There was more.

'But before that,' muttered Pacorus, his gaze moving to Romulus and Brennus. 'Your friends will be killed, slowly and painfully. In front of you.'

Full of rage, Tarquinius' gaze bored into Pacorus. After a few moments, it was the Parthian who looked down. I still have some power, the haruspex thought, but the knowledge was like ash in his dry mouth. Pacorus had the whip hand here, not him. If the gods did not grant him some kind of meaningful vision in the Mithraeum, they would all be slain out of hand. Why had he insisted that his two friends came along tonight? It had been

only the smallest of hunches to ask them. Tarquinius was unconcerned about himself, but guilt suffused his heart that big, brave Brennus and Romulus, the young man he had come to love as a son, would have to pay for his failures. Meeting soon after joining Crassus' army, a close friendship had sprung up between the three. Thanks to the accuracy of his divinations, the others had come to trust Tarquinius utterly. After Carrhae, when escape under the cover of darkness had been an option, they had followed his lead and stayed, blindly pinning their fates to his. Both still looked to him for guidance. It cannot end here or now, Tarquinius thought fiercely. It *must* not.

'So be it,' he cried, using his best prophetic tones. 'Mithras will give me a sign.'

Romulus' and Brennus' heads whipped around, and Tarquinius saw the hope flare in both their faces. Especially in that of Romulus.

Taking some solace from this, he waited.

Pacorus bared his teeth expectantly. 'Follow me,' he said, placing his foot on the first step.

Without the slightest pause, Tarquinius stepped after him.

Just one hulking warrior, Pacorus' personal bodyguard, took up the rear. In his right hand was a ready dagger.

The party of guards fanned out, planting their torches in specially placed gaps in the paving stones. An ash-filled ring fireplace was evidence that they, or others, had stood here before. Romulus was still amazed by the manner of Pacorus' and Tarquinius' disappearance. He had noticed the large, shaped slabs but not fully appreciated that they formed an entrance. Now, with the whole scene relatively well lit, Romulus saw the carved drawings on either side of the hole. Excited, he began to understand. This was a temple, to Mithras.

And Tarquinius seemed sure that something would be revealed inside.

Desperate to know more, he moved to follow the haruspex, but half a dozen Parthians blocked his way.

'Nobody else goes down there,' growled one. 'The Mithraeum is hallowed ground. Filth such as you are not welcome.'

'All men are equal in Mithras' eyes,' Romulus challenged, remembering what Tarquinius had told him. 'And I am a soldier.'

The Parthian looked nonplussed. ‘The commander decides who may enter,’ he barked eventually. ‘And you two weren’t mentioned.’

‘So we just wait?’ demanded Romulus, his temper rising.

‘That’s right,’ replied the warrior, taking a step forward. Several of the others copied him, their hands falling to their quivers. ‘We all stay here until Pacorus says so. Clear?’

They glared at each other. Although the Parthians and the legionaries had now fought together a number of times, there was little love lost between the captors and captives. As far as the Romans were concerned, there never would be. Romulus felt the same way. These men had helped slaughter his comrades at Carrhae.

He felt Brennus’ arm on his. ‘Leave it,’ said the Gaul calmly. ‘Now’s not the time.’

Brennus’ intervention was a simple gut reaction. Over the previous four years, Romulus had become like a son to him. Since they had been thrown together, the Gaul had found his own tortured existence much easier. Romulus provided him with a reason not to die. And now, thanks to Brennus’ repetitive and unrelenting training, the seventeen-year-old was a skilful fighter. Tarquinius’ efforts meant that Romulus was also well educated; he could even read and write. It was only occasionally, when he was severely provoked, that Romulus’ temper got the better of him. I was like that once, Brennus thought.

Taking a deep breath, Romulus stalked off, leaving the Parthian smirking at his companions. He hated always having to back down. Especially when he had the chance of witnessing something so important. But, as usual, walking away was the prudent choice. ‘Why did Tarquinius bother dragging us along?’

‘Back-up.’

‘Against whom? Those miserable dogs?’ Incredulously, Romulus indicated the Parthians. ‘There are twenty of them. With bows.’

‘Bad odds, it’s true,’ shrugged the Gaul. ‘He doesn’t have anyone else to ask, though.’

‘It’s more than that,’ Romulus shot back. ‘Tarquinius must have a reason. We *need* to be here.’

Brennus turned his blond shaggy head this way and that, taking in the barren landscape. It was vanishing into the darkness of another bitter night.

‘I don’t know what,’ he concluded. ‘This is a godforsaken spot. Nothing out here but dirt and rocks.’

Romulus was about to agree when his attention was caught by two spots of light reflecting the radiance from the torches. He froze, squinting into the gloom. At the limit of his vision was a jackal, watching them. Motionless, only the creature’s bright eyes revealed that it was not a statue. ‘We’re not alone,’ he hissed delightedly. ‘There! Look.’

Brennus smiled proudly at the sharp observation. An expert hunter himself, he had missed seeing the small predator. This was becoming more common. Romulus could now follow animals over bare rock, possessing an uncanny ability to notice the smallest detail. The twig out of place, the blade of grass bent double, the change in prints’ depth when the quarry was wounded. Few men had such skill.

Brac had been one.

Old emotion welled up inside Brennus: grief that his young cousin would never have the chance to stand with him like this. Like Brennus’ wife, baby son and his entire Allobroge tribe, Brac was dead, massacred by the Romans eight years before. At exactly the same age Romulus was now. Trying to ease the sharp claws of his ever-present grief, Brennus shook his massive shoulders and silently repeated the Allobroge druid Ultan’s words. The secret prophecy that Tarquinius had somehow known.

A journey beyond where any Allobroge has gone. Or will ever go.

And on Margiana’s eastern border, some four months’ march east of Carrhae and more than three thousand miles from Gaul, Brennus had truly done that. It remained to be seen how, and when, his journey would end. His attention was drawn back to the jackal by Romulus’ eagerly pointing arm. ‘Belenus above,’ Brennus breathed. ‘It’s acting like a dog. See?’

Strangely, the animal was sitting back on its haunches, like a hound might watch its master.

‘That’s the gods’ work,’ muttered Romulus, wondering what Tarquinius would make of it. ‘Has to be.’

‘You could be right,’ Brennus agreed uneasily. ‘Jackals are scavengers, though; they feed on whatever dead flesh is around.’

They exchanged a glance.

‘Men will die here tonight.’ Brennus shivered. ‘I can feel it.’

‘Maybe,’ said Romulus pensively. ‘But I think this is a good sign.’
‘How?’

‘I don’t know.’ Falling silent, Romulus tried to use the snippets that Tarquinius occasionally let fall. Concentrating on his breathing, he focused on the jackal and the air above it, searching for something more than his blue eyes could see. For an age, he did not move, his exhaled breaths clouding round him in a thick, grey layer.

Brennus let him be.

Intent on starting a fire, the Parthians were ignoring them.

At last Romulus turned away. The disappointment on his face was clear.

Brennus eyed the jackal, which hadn’t moved. ‘Couldn’t see anything?’

Romulus shook his head sadly. ‘It’s here to watch over us, but I don’t know why. Tarquinius would, though.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said the Gaul, clapping him on the shoulder. ‘There are four of us against twenty now.’

Romulus had to smile at that.

It was far colder where they were standing, but both felt more kinship with the jackal than with Pacorus’ men. Instead of seeking heat by the fire, they huddled down together by a large boulder.

In the event, it was that decision which probably saved their lives.

Tarquinius felt his pulse quicken as they descended the crudely formed earthen steps, which were easy to see thanks to Pacorus’ torch. The narrow staircase had been dug out of the soil, with timber joists to hold up the sides. Neither the commander nor his guard spoke, which suited Tarquinius. He used the time to pray to Tinia, mightiest of the Etruscan gods. And to Mithras, even though he never had before. Mysterious and unknown, Mithraicism had fascinated Tarquinius ever since he had heard of it, in Rome. The religion had only been carried there a decade previously by legionaries who had campaigned in Asia Minor. Highly secretive in nature, Mithras’ followers were sworn to uphold the values of truth, honour and courage. Rites of great suffering had to be endured to move between the levels of devotion. That was all the haruspex knew.

Of course it was not surprising to see evidence of the warrior deity here, in Margiana. This area was where the cult was strongest, perhaps even where it had originated. The discovery might have been in better

circumstances though. Tarquinius smiled sardonically. He and his friends were under threat of immediate death. So it was time to be bold. With luck, the god would not be angered by a request made by a non-initiate, entering a Mithraeum in this unorthodox manner. After all, I am not just a haruspex, he thought proudly. I am a warrior too.

Great Mithras, I come with a humble heart to worship you. I beg for a sign of your favour. Something to placate your servant, Pacorus. He hesitated for a moment, and then dared all. *I also need your guidance to find a path back to Rome.*

Tarquinius sent his prayer up with all the force he could muster.

The answering silence was deafening.

He tried not to feel disappointed – but failed.

Eighty-four stairs later, they reached the bottom.

A wash of stale air wafted up the tunnel. It was a mixture of men's sweat, incense and burnt wood. Tarquinius' nostrils twitched, and goose bumps formed on his arms. There was palpable power here. If the god was in a favourable mood, perhaps his divining skills *did* have a chance of being revived.

Half turning, Pacorus noticed his reaction and smiled. 'Mithras is mighty indeed,' he said. 'And I will know if you are lying.'

Tarquinius met his stare. 'You will not be displeased,' he said quietly.

Pacorus restrained himself from saying more. Originally, he had been awed by Tarquinius' ability to anticipate the future, and to pluck the solutions to overwhelming problems from thin air. Although he would not openly admit it, the Forgotten Legion's initial successes in driving out the marauding tribes had almost exclusively been thanks to the haruspex. But some months ago, Tarquinius' accurate predictions had dried up, to be replaced with vague, generalised comments. At first Pacorus had been unconcerned, but this had soon changed. He needed the prophecies because his position as commander of Parthia's eastern border was a double-edged sword. While a huge promotion from his previous rank, it came laden with expectation. Pacorus relied on divine help just to survive.

Attacks by war bands from neighbouring lands had been frequent for some time. The reason for this was simple. In anticipation of Crassus' invasion, all local garrisons had been emptied more than twelve months

previously. King Orodes, the Parthian ruler, had diverted every available man to the west, leaving the frontier region with few defences. The nomadic tribes had quickly seized the opportunity to rape and pillage every settlement within easy reach of the border. Growing bold on the back of success, soon they were vying to carve up Margiana.

Pacorus' mission from Orodes was simple: to smash all opposition and restore the peace. Fast. This he had done. But his very success jeopardised his position: the king was wary of any officer who became too effective. Even General Surena, the leader who had achieved the stunning victory at Carrhae, had not been safe. Nervous of Surena's new-found popularity, Orodes had ordered his execution not long after the battle. The news kept officers such as Pacorus in constant uncertainty: eager to please, unsure how to proceed – and desperate for aid from sources such as Tarquinius.

Fear is my last psychological advantage over Pacorus, thought the haruspex. Even that had worn thin. Weariness filled him. If the god revealed nothing, he would have to come up with something believable, enough to convince the ruthless Parthian not to kill them all. But after months of stringing Pacorus along, Tarquinius doubted his imagination was capable of any more.

They walked in silence along a passageway constructed in the same way as the staircase. At length, it opened out into a long, narrow chamber.

Pacorus moved left and right, lighting oil lamps which sat in small alcoves.

As light flooded the room, Tarquinius took in the paintings on the walls, the low seats on each side and the heavy wooden posts supporting the low roof. Inevitably though, his eyes were drawn to the end of the Mithraeum, where a trio of altars was positioned below the dramatic, brightly painted image of a cloaked figure in a Phrygian cap crouched over a kneeling bull while plunging a knife deep into the beast's chest. Mithras. Stars glittered from his dark green cloak; a mysterious figure bearing a flaming torch stood witness on each side of him.

'The tauroctony,' whispered Pacorus, bending his head reverently. 'By killing the sacred bull, Mithras gave life to the world.'

Behind him, Tarquinius sensed the guard bowing. He did the same.

Slowly Pacorus led the way to the altars. Muttering a brief prayer, he bent from the waist. 'The god is present,' he said, stepping aside. 'Let us hope he reveals something to you.'

Tarquinius closed his eyes and gathered his strength. Unusually, his palms were sweaty. Never had there been an occasion where he needed help more. He had made momentous predictions before now, many of them, but not under the threat of immediate execution. And in here, there was no wind, no cloud, no flocks of birds to observe, not even an animal to sacrifice. I am alone, the haruspex thought. Instinctively, he knelt. *Great Mithras, help me!*

He looked up at the godly figure depicted above him. There was a knowing expression in its hooded eyes. What can you offer me? it seemed to say. Other than himself, Tarquinius had no answer. *I will be your faithful servant.*

He waited for a long time.

Nothing.

‘Well?’ demanded Pacorus harshly, his voice echoing in the confined space.

Desolation swamped Tarquinius. His mind was a complete blank.

Furious, Pacorus uttered a few words to his guard, who stepped in close.

This is it, Tarquinius thought angrily. Olenus was wrong in thinking I would journey back from Margiana. Instead, I am to die alone, in a Mithraeum. Romulus and Brennus will be slain too. My whole life has been wasted.

And then, from nowhere, an image seared his retinas.

Nearly a hundred armed men creeping in on a score of Parthian warriors sitting around a fire. Tarquinius’ skin crawled. Talking among themselves, the Parthians were totally unaware.

‘Danger,’ he blurted, jumping up. ‘There is great danger approaching.’

The guard paused, his knife still ready for use.

‘From where?’ demanded Pacorus. ‘Sogdia? Bactria?’

‘You don’t understand,’ cried the haruspex. ‘Here! Now!’

Pacorus’ eyebrows rose disbelievingly.

‘We must warn the others,’ urged Tarquinius. ‘Return to the fort, before it’s too late.’

‘It’s night-time, in midwinter,’ scoffed Pacorus. ‘Twenty of the finest men in Parthia are on watch outside. So are your friends. And nine thousand of my soldiers are only a mile away. What possible danger can there be?’

His guard leered.

‘They are about to be attacked,’ answered Tarquinius simply. ‘Soon.’

‘What? This is how you cover up your incompetence?’ shouted Pacorus, his colour rising. ‘You’re a damn liar!’

Instead of denying the accusation, Tarquinius closed his eyes and brought back the image he had just seen. Somehow he did not allow panic to take hold. *I need more, great Mithras.*

‘Finish it,’ Pacorus ordered.

Tarquinius could sense the knife approaching, but he remained still. This was the ultimate test of his divining ability. There was nothing else he could do, no more he could ask of the god. Cool air brushed Tarquinius’ neck as the guard’s arm rose high. He thought of his innocent friends above. Forgive me.

Carrying down the tunnel, the unmistakable sound of a man shouting the alarm reached their ears.

Shock filled Pacorus’ face, but he regained control fast. ‘Tracherous dog. Told your friends to cry out after a certain time, eh?’

Tarquinius shook his head in silent denial.

There was a long pause before the air filled with blood-curdling yells. Far more noise than two men could make.

Pacorus blanched. He hesitated for a moment, then turned and ran from the chamber, his guard close on his heels.

Rising, Tarquinius was about to follow, when he felt a surge of power.

The god’s revelation was not over.

But his friends were in mortal danger.

Guilt mixed with anger, and desire for knowledge. He knelt again. There was time.

A little time.

A long half-hour passed. The temperature, which had been hovering just below freezing all day, fell much further. Using a stockpile of timber left there for the purpose, the Parthian warriors fed the blazing fire until it was the height of a man. While a few stood guard on a perimeter roughly thirty paces out, the remainder hunched around it, talking between themselves. Few even glanced at Romulus and Brennus, the interlopers.

The two friends stamped up and down, doing their best to keep warm.

It was a futile battle. Still they felt no inclination to join the Parthians, whose attitude towards them was at best contemptuous. Brennus fell into a deep reverie about his future while Romulus studied the jackal, hoping to understand its reasons for staying. His efforts were in vain. Finally the animal stood up, shook itself in a leisurely manner and trotted off to the south. It was lost to sight instantly.

Later, Romulus would remember the timing with awe.

‘Gods above,’ muttered Brennus, his teeth chattering. ‘I hope Tarquinius is done soon. Otherwise we’re going to have to join those bastards by the fire.’

‘He won’t be long,’ Romulus replied confidently. ‘Pacorus has reached the end of his tether with him.’

Everyone in the Forgotten Legion knew that when their commander lost his temper, men were executed.

‘The prick’s been looking twitchy,’ agreed Brennus, counting the Parthians for the umpteenth time. There are too many of them, he decided. ‘Probably order us all killed next. Shame the jackal didn’t stick around to help, eh?’

Romulus was about to reply when his gaze fell on the two furthest sentries. Wraithlike figures had appeared behind them, bearing long knives. He watched disbelievingly for a heartbeat before opening his mouth to shout a warning. But it was too late. The Parthians toppled backwards and out of sight, silent sprays of red jetting from their cut throats.

None of their companions noticed.

‘To arms!’ Romulus roared. ‘We are under attack from the east!’

Alarmed, the other warriors scrambled to their feet, reaching for their weapons and staring out into the pitch darkness.

From it, fearsome yells rose into the freezing air.

Brennus was beside Romulus in an instant. ‘Wait,’ he cautioned. ‘Don’t move yet.’

‘They’re spotlit by the fire,’ said Romulus, understanding.

‘Fools,’ muttered Brennus.

The first arrows descended as they watched. Fired from beyond the firelight, they fell in a dense, deadly rain. A perfectly laid ambush, it was bizarrely beautiful to watch. More than half the Parthians were killed

outright by the volley, and several others were wounded. The remainder frantically grabbed their bows and loosed shaft after blind shaft in response.

Romulus raised his silk-covered *scutum* and was about to race forward, but Brennus' great paw stopped him again. 'Tarquinius . . .' he protested.

'Is safe underground for the moment.'

Romulus relaxed a fraction.

'They'll charge next,' the Gaul said as the terrifying shouts increased in volume. 'And when they do, let's give them a little surprise of our own.'

Brennus' guess was correct. What he had not foreseen was the number of attackers.

There was another shower of arrows and then the enemy came in at a run. Dozens of them. With bows like those of the Parthians slung over their shoulders, they waved swords, knives and vicious-looking short-headed axes. Dressed in felt hats, ornate scale mail and knee-high boots, the brown-skinned men could only be one nationality: Scythian. Romulus and Brennus had already encountered the fierce nomads in skirmishes on the border. Although their empire's heyday had passed, the Scythians still made unrelenting enemies. And their hooked arrow heads were coated in a deadly poison called *scythicon*. Anyone even scratched with it died in agonising pain.

Brennus cursed quietly, and Romulus' stomach clenched.

Tarquinius was still in the Mithraeum, and they could not just leave him to his fate. Yet if they tried to rescue the haruspex, certain death would come to all of them. There were at least fifty Scythians visible now, and more were appearing. Bitterness filled Romulus at the randomness of life. The idea of returning to Rome now seemed laughable.

'They can't have missed the noise,' Brennus whispered. 'Pacorus is no coward. He'll come charging out at any moment. And there's only one way to save their lives.'

'Go in, quick and silent,' said Romulus.

Pleased, Brennus nodded. 'Hit any Scythians by the temple's entrance. Grab Tarquinius and the others. Then make a run for it.'

Clinging to his words, Romulus led the way.

They ran hard and fast, their cold muscles aching with the effort. Thankfully, adrenalin soon kicked in, giving them extra speed. Javelins

in hand, both cocked their right arms back, preparing to throw when the time was right. Engrossed with the surviving Parthians, the Scythians were not even looking outwards. They had encircled their foes, and were closing in.

With a century behind us, thought Romulus wistfully, we'd smash them into pieces. Now though, they had to trust that Tarquinius emerged at the right time and they could escape into the night. It was a slim hope.

Like two avenging ghosts, they closed in on the Mithraeum's unguarded entrance.

Still they were not seen.

Cries of fear filled the air as the last Parthians realised that their fate was sealed.

A few steps from the hole, Romulus was beginning to think that they might just do it. Then a lightly built Scythian straightened up from a prone Parthian, wiping his sword on the corpse's clothing. His mouth opened and closed as he saw them. Snapping out an order, the Scythian rushed forward. Nine men followed, some quickly sheathing their weapons and unslinging their bows.

'You look for Tarquinius,' yelled Romulus as they skidded to a stop by the opening. 'I'll hold them.'

Trusting his friend implicitly, Brennus dropped his *pila* by Romulus' feet. Ripping a torch from the ground, he clattered down the steps. 'Won't be long,' he yelled.

'I'll be dead if you are.' Grimly, Romulus closed one eye and took aim. With the ease of long practice, he threw his first *pilum* in a low, curving arc. It hit the lead Scythian twenty paces away, skewering right through his scale mail and running deep into his chest. He dropped like a pole-axed mule.

But his comrades scarcely paused.

Romulus' second javelin punched into a stocky Scythian's belly, taking him out of the equation. His third missed, but the fourth pierced the throat of a warrior with a long black beard. Giving him a little more respect now, three Scythians slowed down and strung shafts to their bows. The four others redoubled their speed.

Seven of the whoresons, Romulus thought, his heart pounding with a combination of madness and fear. Poison arrows too. Bad news. What should

I do? Suddenly, Cotta, his trainer in the *ludus*, came to mind. *If all else fails, take the battle to an unsuspecting enemy. The element of surprise is invaluable.* He could think of nothing else, and there was still no sign of Brennus or Tarquinius.

Yelling at the top of his voice, Romulus charged forward.

The Scythians smiled at his recklessness. Here was another fool to kill.

Reaching the first, Romulus used the one-two method of punching with his metal shield boss and following with a thrust of his *gladius*. It worked well. Spinning away from his falling enemy, he heard an arrow strike his *scutum*. Then another. Thankfully, the silk did its job and neither penetrated. A third whistled past his ear. Knowing he had a moment before more were loosed, Romulus peered over the iron rim. Two Scythians were almost on him. The last was a few steps behind, while the trio with bows were fitting their second shafts.

Romulus' mouth felt bone dry.

Then a familiar battle cry filled his ears.

The Scythians faltered; Romulus risked a glance over his shoulder. Springing from the entrance like a great bear, Brennus had launched himself half a dozen steps forward.

Next came Pacorus, screaming with rage. He was followed closely by the hulking guard, waving his knife over his head.

There was no sign of Tarquinius.

Romulus had no time to dwell on this. He spun back and barely managed to parry a powerful blow from a Scythian. He stabbed forward in response, but missed. Then the man's comrade nearly took off his sword arm with a huge downward cut. It missed by a whisker. Sparks went flying upward as the iron blade struck the flagstones, and Romulus moved fast. The second Scythian had overextended himself with the daring blow, and in the process, exposed his neck. Leaning forward, Romulus shoved his *gladius* into the unprotected spot between the man's felt hat and his mail. Slicing through skin and muscle, it entered the chest cavity, severing most of the major blood vessels. The Scythian was a corpse before Romulus even tried to withdraw his blade. Shocked, his comrade still had the presence of mind to lower his right shoulder and drive forward into Romulus' left side.

The air left his lungs with a rush, and Romulus fell awkwardly to the

frozen ground. Somehow he held on to his *gladius*. Desperately he pulled on it, feeling the blade grating off his enemy's clavicle as it came out, far too slowly. It was hopeless.

His lips peeled back with satisfaction, the Scythian jumped to stand over Romulus. His right arm went up, preparing to deliver the death stroke.

Bizarrely, Romulus could think only of Tarquinius. Where was he? Had he seen anything?

The Scythian made a high, keening sound of pain. Surprised, Romulus looked up. There was a familiar-looking knife protruding from his enemy's left eye socket. He could have shouted for joy: it belonged to Brennus. Somehow the Gaul had saved his life.

With a hefty kick, Romulus sent the Scythian tumbling backwards. Craning his neck, he looked for the others. Brennus and Pacorus were within arm's reach, fighting side by side. Unfortunately, the guard was already down, two arrows protruding from his belly.

But they now had a tiny chance.

Carefully retrieving his *scutum*, Romulus sat up, protecting himself from enemy shafts.

One immediately slammed into it, but he was able to take in the situation.

The trio of archers were still on their feet.

And at least a score of Scythians were running to join the fray.

With arrows raining down around him, Romulus managed to retreat unhurt to Brennus' side.

'Give me your shield,' Pacorus ordered him at once.

Romulus stared at his commander. My life, or his? he considered. Death now, or later? 'Yes, sir,' he said slowly, without moving. 'Of course.'

'Now!' Pacorus screamed.

As one, the archers drew back and loosed again. Three arrows shot forward, seeking human flesh. They took Pacorus in the chest, arm and left leg.

He went down, bellowing in pain. 'Curse you,' he cried. 'I'm a dead man.'

More and more shafts hissed into the air.

'Where's Tarquinius?' shouted Romulus.

‘Still in the Mithraeum. Looked like he was praying.’ Brennus grimaced.
‘Want to make a run for it?’
Romulus shook his head fiercely. ‘No way.’
‘Me neither.’
As one, they turned to face the Scythians.