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Centurion

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

As dusk settled over the port the cohort's commander peered down the cliff towards the river. A faint mist covered the Euphrates and spilled over the banks on either side, rising even above the trees that grew along the river, so that it seemed like the smooth belly of a snake, gently undulating across the landscape. The thought made the hairs rise on the back of Centurion Castor's neck. He pulled his cloak tightly about his chest, narrowed his eyes and stared towards the land spreading away on the far side of the Euphrates: Parthian territory.

It was over a hundred years since the might of Rome had first come into contact with the Parthians and, ever since, both empires had been playing a deadly game for control of Palmyra and the lands to the east of the Roman province of Syria. Now that Rome was negotiating a closer treaty with Palmyra her influence had spread to the banks of the Euphrates, right on the frontier with her old foe. There was no longer any buffer state between Rome and Parthia and few men had any doubt that the simmering hostility would flare up into a new conflict before long. The legions back in Syria had already been preparing for a campaign when the centurion and his men had marched out of the gates of Damascus.

The thought made Centurion Castor bitterly resent, once again, the orders he had received from Rome to lead a cohort of auxiliaries across the desert, far beyond even Palmyra, to establish a fort here on the cliffs above the Euphrates. Palmyra was eight days' march away to the west and the nearest Roman soldiers were based at Emesa, six days beyond Palmyra. Castor had never felt so isolated in his life. He, and his four hundred men, were at the very end of the Empire, posted on this cliff to watch for any sign of an attack by Parthia across the Euphrates.

After an exhausting march across the barren, rocky desert they had set up camp near the cliff and begun work on the fort they would garrison until some official back in Rome eventually decided to relieve them. During the march the cohort had baked under the sun during the day, and huddled in their cloaks each night as the temperature had dropped like a stone. Water had been strictly rationed, and when they had finally reached the great river that cut across the desert and watered the fertile crescent that lined the banks his men had rushed down into the shallows to slake their thirst, deliriously scooping water to their cracked lips, before their officers could restrain them.

Having served for three years in the Tenth Legion's garrison at Cyrrhus, with its fine well-watered gardens and all the pleasures of the flesh that a man could want, Castor regarded his temporary posting with growing dread. The cohort faced the prospect of spending months, perhaps years, in this far-flung corner of the

world. If boredom didn't kill them first, then the Parthians surely would. That was why the centurion had driven his men to work on the fort as soon as they found a spot on this cliff that afforded fine views over the ford below, and the rolling plains of Parthia beyond. Castor knew that word of the Roman presence would swiftly reach the ears of the Parthian king and it was vital that the cohort threw up strong defences before the Parthians decided to take any action against them. For several days the auxiliaries had toiled to level the ground and prepare foundations for the walls and towers of the new fort. Then the masons had hurriedly dressed the slabs of rock that had been hauled by wagon from the surrounding outcrops on to the site. The retaining walls were already at waist height and the gap between them filled with rubble and spoil, and as he glanced over the site in the dying light Centurion Castor nodded with satisfaction. In five more days, the defences would have risen high enough for him to move the camp inside the walls of the new fort. Then they could afford to feel more secure from the Parthians. Until then the men would labour every hour that daylight allowed.

The sun had set a while ago and only a faint band of russet light still gleamed along the horizon. Castor turned to his second-in-command, Centurion Septimus. 'Time to finish for the day.'

Septimus nodded, drew a lungful of air and cupped a hand to his mouth as he bellowed the order across the construction site.

'Cohort! Down tools, and return to camp!'

Across the site Castor could see the dim shapes of men wearily stacking their picks, shovels and wicker baskets before taking up their shields and spears and shuffling into the lines forming outside the gap where the main gate would be. As the last of them moved into position the wind began to rise, out of the desert, and squinting towards the west Castor saw a dense mass rolling steadily towards them.

'Dust storm coming this way,' he grumbled to Septimus. 'Better get down to the camp before it hits.'

The other man nodded. Septimus had served on the eastern frontier for most of his career and well knew how quickly men could lose their sense of direction once they were engulfed in the choking, abrasive sand whipped up by the winds that swept these lands.

'Those lucky bastards down in the camp are well out of it.'

Castor smiled briefly. A half-century had been left to guard the camp while their comrades toiled away up on the cliff. He could imagine them already retreating into the shelter of the sentry turrets, out of biting wind and sand. 'Well then, let's get the men moving.'

He gave the order to advance and the men trudged forward, down the winding track that led to the camp, just over a mile from the site of the fort. The wind picked up as the gloom thickened over the landscape and the soldiers' capes fluttered and whipped about them as they descended the rock-strewn route from the cliff.

'Shan't be sorry to leave this place, sir,' Septimus

growled. 'Any idea how long before we're replaced? There's a warm billet waiting for me and the lads at Emesa.'

Castor shook his head. 'No idea. I'm as keen to get out of here as you are. All depends on the situation in Palmyra, and what our Parthian friends decide to do about it.'

'Fucking Parthians,' Septimus spat. 'Bastards are always stirring it up. It was them that was behind that business down in Judaea last year, wasn't it?'

Castor nodded as he recalled the uprising that had flared up east of the Jordan river. The Parthians had supplied the rebels with arms and a small force of horse-archers. It was only thanks to the gallant efforts of the garrison at Fort Bushir that the rebels and their Parthian allies had been prevented from inciting the whole of Judaea to rise up against Rome. Now, the Parthians had turned their attention to the oasis city of Palmyra – a vital link in the trade routes to the east and a buffer between the Roman Empire and Parthia. Palmyra enjoyed considerable independence and was more of a protectorate than a subject state. But the king of Palmyra was growing old and the rival members of his household were jockeying for position to become his successor. One of the most powerful of the Palmyran princes had made little secret of his desire to throw in his lot with Parthia, if he became the new ruler.

Castor cleared his throat. 'It's down to the governor of Syria to convince the Parthians to keep their hands off Palmyra.'

Centurion Septimus cocked an eyebrow. 'Cassius Longinus? Think he's up to it?'

Castor was silent for a moment as he considered his reply. 'Longinus can handle it. He's no imperial lackey; he's earned his promotions. If he can't win the diplomatic battle then I'm sure he'll take them apart in a fight. If it comes to that.'

'Wish I shared your confidence, sir.' Septimus shook his head. 'From what I heard, Longinus took to his heels pretty quickly last time he was in trouble.'

'Who told you that?' Castor snapped.

'I got it from some officer in the garrison at Bushir, sir. Seems that Longinus was at the fort when the rebels turned up. The governor was in his saddle and out of there quicker than a Subura whore goes through your purse.'

Castor shrugged. 'I'm sure he had his reasons.'

'I'm sure he did.'

Castor turned to his subordinate with a frown. 'Look, we've no business debating the governor's finer points. Especially not in earshot of the men. So keep it to yourself, understand?'

Centurion Septimus pursed his lips for a moment and then nodded. 'As you wish, sir.'

The column continued down the slope, and as the wind strengthened the first swirl of dust swept across the track. Within moments all sign of the surrounding landscape had vanished and Castor slowed his pace to make certain that he was still leading his men along the track to the camp. They edged forward, shoulders

hunched as they did their best to shelter behind their shields from the blasts of sand. At length the track levelled out as they reached the foot of the slope. Even though the fort was only a short distance ahead, the sand and gathering darkness hid it from view.

'Not far now,' Castor muttered to himself.

Septimus overheard him. 'Good. First thing I do when I reach my tent is clear my throat with a drop of wine.'

'Good idea. Mind if I join you?'

Septimus gritted his teeth at the unexpected request, and moodily resigned himself to sharing the last flask of the wine he had brought across the desert from Palmyra. He cleared his throat and nodded. 'It'd be a pleasure, sir.'

Castor laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. 'Good man! When we get back to Palmyra, the first drink's on me.'

'Yes, sir. Thank—' Septimus suddenly drew up sharply and strained his eyes along the track ahead of them. Then he thrust up his hand to signal the column to halt.

'What's the matter?' Castor said quietly as he stood close to the side of his subordinate. 'What is it?'

Septimus nodded towards the fort. 'I saw something, just ahead of us. A horseman.'

Both officers stared into the swirling sand before them, straining their ears and eyes, but there was no sign of anyone, mounted or on foot. Just the smudges of stunted shrubs that grew either side of the track. Castor swallowed, and forced his tensed muscles to relax.

'What exactly did you see?'

Septimus glanced at him with an angry expression, sensing his superior's doubt. 'As I said, a horseman. About fifty paces ahead. The sand cleared for a moment and I saw him, just for an instant.'

Castor nodded. 'Sure it wasn't just a trick of the light? Could easily have been one of those bushes moving.'

'I'm telling you, sir. It was a horse. Plain as anything. I swear it by all the Gods. Up there ahead of us.'

Castor was about to reply when both men heard a faint metallic ringing above the moan of the wind. The sound was unmistakable to any soldier: the clash of sword against sword. An instant later there was a muffled shout, and then nothing apart from the wind. Castor felt his blood chill in his veins as he turned to Septimus and spoke quietly.

'Pass the word to the other officers. Have the men formed up in close order across the track. Do it quietly.'

'Yes, sir.' Centurion Septimus saluted and dropped back to pass the word down the line. While the men fanned out on either side of the track Castor took a few strides closer to the camp. A freak shift in the wind gave him a faint glimpse of the gatehouse and a body slumped against the timber frame, which was studded with several arrows. Then a veil of dust hid the camp from view again. Castor backed away towards his men. The auxiliaries stood in a line four deep across the track, shields held high and spears angled forward as they gazed anxiously towards the camp. Septimus was waiting for his commander at the head of the century on the right flank.

Beside them the slope rose up into a tangle of rocks and undergrowth.

'Did you see anything, sir?'

Castor nodded and waited until he stood beside the other officer before he spoke in a low voice. 'The camp's been attacked.'

'Attacked?' Septimus raised his eyebrows. 'Who is it? The Parthians?'

'Who else?'

Septimus nodded and his hand slid down and grasped the handle of his sword. 'What are your orders, sir?'

'They're still close. In this sandstorm they could be anywhere. We have to try to get back inside the camp, clear them out and get the gate closed. That's our best chance.'

Septimus smiled grimly. 'Our only chance, you mean, sir.'

Castor did not reply, but flicked the folds of his cape back over his shoulders and drew his sword. He raised it high and glanced along the line to make sure that the other officers were following his example and passing the signal on. Castor had no idea how many enemies they faced. If they were bold enough to storm and take the camp, then they must have attacked in some strength. The mist over the river and the rising sandstorm would have covered their approach. Castor drew small comfort from the fact that the same sandstorm would now provide some cover for the rest of the cohort as they approached the fort. With luck, the auxiliaries might even surprise the enemy in turn. He slowly lowered his sword arm, the tip

arcing down towards the fort. The signal was repeated down the line and on to those men to his left who were hidden in the gloom and dust.

Castor drew his sword in until the side of the blade rested against the rim of his shield and then he stepped forward. The line rippled after him as the auxiliaries trod steadily over the broken ground towards the camp. The officers kept the pace slow enough to be able to dress the line as it advanced. To the right the slope gave way to open ground as the flanking century moved away from the cliff. Castor stared ahead with narrowed eyes, looking for any sign of the enemy, or the fortifications of the camp. Then he saw it, the bulk of the main gate emerging from the sweep of dust and sand. The outline of the raised palisade on either side resolved itself into sharp detail as the auxiliaries closed on the camp. Apart from the body resting against the gate post there was no sign of anyone else, living or dead.

The sound of hooves thrummed across the ground to his right and Castor turned to look just as one of his men on the end of the line cried out and snatched at the shaft of an arrow that had pierced his chest. Dim shapes burst through the veil of the sandstorm as several Parthian horse-archers galloped up to the auxiliaries and loosed their arrows into the unprotected right sides of the Roman soldiers. Four more men were hit and tumbled to the ground while another doubled over, but tried to stay on his feet as he wrestled with an arrow that had passed through his thigh and pinned it to the other leg. The Parthians wheeled their mounts to one side and raced

back out of sight, leaving the auxiliaries staring after them in surprise and terror.

Almost at once there was a cry from the left as the enemy made another attack.

'Keep moving!' Castor cried out in desperation as he heard yet more horses passing behind the cohort. 'Run, boys!'

The ordered lines of the cohort dissolved into a mass of men running towards the main gate, Castor amongst them. Then he saw the gates closing and at once scores of faces appeared above the palisade. Bows were raised and again the sound of arrows hissed through the air and more of the auxiliaries were struck down as they drew up helplessly in front of the camp. There was no let-up in the rain of arrows that clattered off shields, or pierced flesh with a wet thud. Voices were crying out on all sides and with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach Castor realised that his men were as good as dead, unless he did something.

'On me!' Castor roared out. 'Close up on me!'

A handful of men heeded the order and raised their shields round Castor and the cohort's standard. More men joined them, roughly jostled into position by Septimus as he made for his commander. Once there were perhaps fifty men formed into a tight circle, with shields raised, Castor shouted the order to retreat along the track towards the cliff. They fell back slowly into the dusk, leaving their wounded comrades who pleaded desperately not to be abandoned to the Parthians. Castor steeled his heart. There was nothing he could do for the

injured. The only shelter left to the survivors of the cohort was the partially built fort on the cliff. If they could reach that then there was a better chance of making a final stand. The cohort was doomed, but they would take as many of the Parthians with them as possible.

The small band of auxiliaries reached the foot of the cliff before the enemy realised their intention and came after them in earnest. Horsemen rode out of the darkness to loose their shafts and then reined in and steadily notched and aimed more arrows once they realised there was no further need for hit and run tactics. As the cohort edged up the track they presented a narrow target to the enemy, and a solid wall of shields protected the rear of the small band of survivors as they climbed back up to the construction site. The Parthians followed them, as closely as they dared, shooting arrows the moment a gap opened in the shields. As they realised the futility of trying to shoot through the shields they switched their aim to the unprotected legs of their quarry, forcing them to crouch low and slowing them down as they toiled up the track. Even so, five more men were injured before the track evened out and the small column of auxiliaries reached the perimeter of the site. Up on the cliff the wind was still keen, but they were at least free of the clouds of dust and could see clearly over the billowing sand that blotted out the surrounding landscape.

Leaving Septimus to command the rearguard, Castor led the rest in through the foundations of the main gate. The walls were too low to keep the Parthians out of the

fort, and the only place the auxiliaries could make a stand was at the nearly completed watchtower in the far corner of the fort, on the very edge of the cliff.

'This way!' Castor bellowed. 'Follow me!'

They hurried across the maze of straight lines of rocks that marked the locations for the buildings and thoroughfares planned for the fort. Up ahead the bulk of the watchtower loomed against the star-scattered night sky. As soon as they reached the timber-framed structure Castor stood by the entrance and waved his men inside. There were barely more than twenty with him and he knew that they would be lucky if they survived to see the next dawn. Ducking inside, Castor gave orders for the men to man the platform above the tower and the window slots on the floor above the entrance. He kept four soldiers with him to defend the entrance as they waited for Septimus and the rearguard to catch up with them. There was only a brief delay before several dim figures burst through the uncompleted gatehouse and raced towards the watchtower. Moments later a wave of enemy warriors appeared and chased after them with cries of triumph.

Castor cupped a hand to his mouth and shouted. 'They're right on you! Run!'

The men of the rearguard were weighed down by their armour and already exhausted from the day's labour, and they stumbled across the site. One tripped on a loose rock and tumbled to the ground with a shrill cry, but not one of his comrades even paused to look back, and moments later he was engulfed by the wave of Parthians

surging towards the watchtower. They swarmed over the fallen auxiliary for a moment, hacking and slashing at him with their curved blades. His death brought his comrades just enough time to reach the watchtower and they piled inside, lowering their shields as they gasped for breath. Septimus licked his lips as he forced himself to straighten up and report, chest heaving.

'Lost two men, sir . . . One back on the track, and the other just then.'

'I saw.' Castor nodded.

'What now?'

'We hold them off for as long as we can.'

'And then?'

Castor laughed. 'Then we die. But not before we send at least forty of them ahead of us to line our path to Hades.'

Septimus forced himself to grin, for the sake of the men watching the exchange. Then he glanced over Castor's shoulders and his expression hardened. 'Here they come, sir.'

Castor turned round and raised his shield. 'We have to hold them here! Form up!'

Septimus stood at his side and the four men raised their spears ready to thrust over the heads of the two officers. Beyond the entrance the dark mass of the Parthians charged across the rubble-strewn ground and hurled themselves at the shields blocking the door. Castor braced himself an instant before the inside of his shield lurched towards him under the impact. Then he dug his iron-shod boots in and thrust back, punching his

weight behind the shield boss. There was an explosive gasp as the blow struck home. Over his shoulder the sharp point and shaft of one of the auxiliaries stabbed out and there was a cry of agony from outside the watchtower. As the spear was drawn back a flicker of warm droplets spattered across Castor's eyes. He blinked them away as a sword blow hacked against the outside of his shield. Beside him, Centurion Septimus pressed his shield forward into the mass of the enemy crowding the entrance and thrust his sword at any exposed flesh he could see between the rim of his shield and the door frame.

As long as the two officers stood their ground and were supported by the men behind, ready to stab out with their spears, the enemy could not get in through the entrance. For a moment Castor felt his spirits rise as the fight began to go their way for the first time.

Too late he sensed the flicker of movement low to the ground just outside the entrance as one of the Parthians crouched and swept his blade beneath the rim of Castor's shield. The edge of the blade cut deep into his ankle, severing leather, flesh and muscle before it fetched up against bone. The pain was instantaneous, like a red-hot bar thrust into the joint. Castor staggered backwards with an explosive cry of pain and rage.

Septimus glanced back quickly, seeing his commander slump to one side of the entrance. 'Next man! Into line!'

The nearest auxiliary, crouching low to protect his legs, pressed himself forward, alongside Septimus, as his comrades thrust their spear tips at the enemy in a

flurry of attacks to drive them back from the entrance. Then all at once there was a shout of alarm from the darkness and the crash of heavy masonry outside the watchtower. As Castor leaned round the frame to look he saw a piece of dressed stone smash down on to the Parthians, crushing a man's head as it drove his body to the ground. More rocks and stones fell on the attackers, killing and maiming several before they could scramble back across the site to a safe distance.

'Bloody marvellous,' Septimus growled with pleasure at the sight. 'See how they like being hit without a chance to fight back. Bastards.'

As the enemy moved out of range the barrage of stones tailed off and the sounds of combat gave way to the jeers and whistles of the auxiliaries in the watchtower, and the moans and cries of the injured men in front of the entrance. Septimus took a last glance outside before he motioned one of the men to take his place. Leaning his shield against the wall he knelt down to examine Castor's wound, straining his eyes to make it out by the wan glow from the starry heavens shining through the entrance. His hands gently probed the injury and felt the shards of bone amid the mangled flesh. Castor sucked in a deep breath and clenched his teeth as he fought back the impulse to cry out in agony.

Septimus glanced up at him. 'I'm sorry to say your fighting days are over.'

'Tell me something I don't know,' Castor hissed.

Septimus smiled briefly. 'I have to stop this bleeding. Give me your scarf, sir.'

Castor loosened the cloth, unwound it and passed it down. Septimus held one end behind the calf and then glanced up. 'This is going to hurt. Ready?'

'Just get on with it.'

Septimus wound the cloth round the leg, over the wound, and then bound it tightly over the ankle and tied it off. The searing pain was like nothing Castor had ever endured before and despite the cold of the night he was sweating freely by the time Septimus finished the knot and rose to his feet.

'You'll have to prop me up on the stairs when the time comes to make our last stand.'

Septimus nodded. 'I'll see to it, sir.'

The officers stared at each other for a moment as they considered the full import of their last exchange. Now that they had accepted the inevitable Castor felt that the burden of anxiety over the fate of his command had lifted. Despite the torment of his wound, there was a calm sense of resignation in his heart, and a determination to go down fighting. Septimus glanced away, through the door, and saw the enemy standing in clusters about the site, out of range of the rocks and stones that the auxiliaries had thrown from the watchtower.

'Wonder what they'll do next?' he mused. 'Starve us out?'

Castor shook his head. He had served in the region long enough in the east to know the nature of Rome's old enemy. 'They'll not wait for that. There's no honour in it.'

'What then?'

Castor shrugged. 'We'll know soon enough.'

There was a moment's silence before Septimus turned away from the entrance. 'So what is this? A raid? The opening of a new campaign against Rome?'

'Does it matter?'

'I want to know the reason for my death.'

Castor pursed his lips and considered the situation. 'It could be a raid. Maybe they saw the construction of this fort as an act of provocation. But it's equally possible they want to clear a path across the Euphrates for their army to cross. It could be the first move towards taking control of Palmyra.'

Castor's thoughts were interrupted by a shout from outside.

'Romans! Hear me!' a voice called out in Greek. 'Parthia calls on you to lay down your arms and surrender!'

'Bollocks!' Septimus snorted.

The man outside in the dark did not respond to the taunt and continued in an even tone. 'My commander calls on you to surrender. If you lay down your weapons, you will be spared. He gives his word.'

'Spared?' Castor repeated softly before he shouted out his reply. 'You will spare us and permit us to return to Palmyra?'

There was a short pause before the voice continued. 'Your lives will be spared, but you will be taken prisoner.'

'Slaves is what we'll be,' Septimus growled and spat on the floor. 'I'll not die a fucking slave.' He turned to Castor. 'Sir? What should we do?'

'Tell him to go to Hades.'

Septimus smiled thinly, his teeth luminous in the moonlight. He turned to the entrance and shouted his reply. 'If you want our weapons, come and get them!'

Castor chuckled. 'Hardly original, but a nice touch.'

The officers exchanged a grin and the other men smiled nervously, until the voice called to them one last time.

'So be it. Then this place will be your grave. Or rather . . . your pyre.'

A faint glow had appeared on the far side of the construction site and as Septimus watched a small flame flared up, silhouetting the warrior crouched over his tinder box. The flame was efficiently fed so that it quickly flared up into a small blaze as men gathered round to light torches hastily gathered from the surrounding scrub. Then they approached the watchtower and as Septimus watched the first of the fire arrows was offered to a torch until the oiled rags caught alight. At once the archer drew his bow and shot at the watchtower. The arrow blazed through the darkness and thudded into the scaffolding, scattering a small shower of sparks. Immediately, other arrows flamed towards the structure, embedding themselves in the wood with splintering cracks and burning as they lodged there.

'Shit!' Septimus clenched his fist round the handle of his sword. 'They mean to burn us out.'

Castor knew there was no water in the tower and he shook his head. 'There's nothing we can do about it. Call the men down from the watchtower.'

'Yes, sir.'

A short while later, as the last of the survivors crowded into the small guard room at the foot of the tower, Castor hauled himself up and leaned against the wall so that he could address them.

'It's all over for us, lads. We stay here and burn, or go out there and take some of those bastards with us. That's it. So when I give the order, you follow Centurion Septimus out of the tower. Stay close to each other and run hard at them. Understand?'

A handful of them nodded and some managed a few words of acknowledgement. Septimus cleared his throat. 'What about you, sir? You can't come with us.'

'I know. I'll stay here and deal with the standard. They can't be allowed to take that.' Castor held his hand out to the cohort's signifer. 'Here, let me have it.'

The standard-bearer hesitated a moment, and then stepped forward and handed the shaft over to his commander. 'Take care of it, sir.'

Castor nodded as he grasped the standard firmly and used it to support the weight on his injured leg. Around them the crackle and soft roar of flames filled the warm air and a lurid orange glow lit up the ground around the watchtower. Castor staggered towards the narrow wooden staircase in the corner. 'When I get to the roof, I'll give the order to charge. Make every thrust of your spears and every blow of your swords count, lads.'

'We will, sir,' Septimus replied softly.

Castor nodded and clasped the centurion's arm briefly, and then, gritting his teeth, he made for the roof,

painfully working his way up the wooden stairs as the air grew heated around him and wisps of smoke curled into the orange light seeping through the windows and arrow slits. By the time he reached the roof, the side of the watchtower closest to the enemy was ablaze. Castor could see scores of Parthians waiting in the bright glare of the flames and he drew a deep breath.

'Centurion Septimus! Now! Charge!'

There was a thin chorus of war cries from the base of the tower and Castor saw the Parthians raise their bows, concentrating their aim, and then the air was filled with the flitting dark splinters of their arrows. Over the parapet he saw the small compact body of his men charging out across the site. Their shoulders were hunched down behind their shields as they ran straight at the enemy, following Septimus as he bellowed insults at the Parthians. The archers stood their ground and shot their arrows as fast as they could at the moving target. Those who still had fire arrows to hand loosed those and brilliant flaring paths cut through the air towards the auxiliaries. Several lodged in shields and burned there as their owners ran on. Then Castor saw Septimus suddenly draw up and stand still, his sword dropping from his hand as he clutched at the point of an arrow that had passed through his neck as the last of his cries still echoed over the site. Then he slumped to his knees and toppled forward on to the ground, writhing feebly as he bled to death.

The auxiliaries closed round his body and raised their shields. Castor watched them in bitter frustration. The

impetus of the charge had died with Septimus and now they were picked off one by one as Parthian arrows found their way in between the shields and pierced the flesh of the men behind. Castor did not wait to see the end. Leaning heavily on the standard he crossed to the far side of the platform and looked down the cliff towards the river. Far below the mist had cleared and moonlight rippled off the swirling current as it flowed over some rocks. Castor tipped his head back and looked into the serene depths of the heavens and breathed the night air deep into his lungs.

A sudden crash of timber from the far side of the tower made him glance round and he knew that there was no time left if he was to make sure the standard did not fall into enemy hands. Through the wavering curtain of the flames and smoke he could see the shimmering ranks of the Parthians and he knew that this was only the beginning. Soon a tide of fire and destruction would spill across the desert and threaten to engulf the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. Castor grasped the shaft of the standard firmly in both hands and limped to the very edge of the platform. He took one last deep breath and gritted his teeth and then hurled himself into the void.