

## Chapter 1

I have always regarded myself as a fair man, or at the very least one prepared to hear both sides of an argument before coming to a decision. Which is why I had not ordered the immediate execution of the two men standing before me. They had been arrested by the city authorities following their interrogation of an elderly owner of a camel train transporting silk from Susa to Palmyra. Each caravan had its own guards to protect not only its precious cargo but also its beasts and the men who rode them. But the two before me were not only thugs and torturers; they were skilled in infiltrating guarded places unseen and stealing away individuals. They would have succeeded in their mission had it not have been for the loyal dog of the man they had taken hostage, which followed his master to the inn where the two hostage-takers were staying. As they tortured him the dog sat outside their room and howled, bringing unwanted attention leading to their arrest. They had tortured the unfortunate man to within an inch of his life, and indeed it was uncertain whether he would survive.

The pair were brought before the city magistrates for sentencing and would have already been dangling at the end of a rope were it not for them pleading to see me, a plea that was refused. Their declaration they were both working on the direct orders of King Spartacus brought them a temporary reprieve, only because the magistrates thought I should be made aware of their presence in Dura. Their further attestation they were searching for Prince Akmon brought them to the palace.

They stood manacled in the middle of the throne room, their hardened faces registering a look somewhere in the middle of defiance and indifference, which was quite amazing considering their deaths could be moments away. Their clothing was unremarkable – light brown leggings and tunics – though they both wore sturdy leather boots and the clerk of the magistrates informed me their confiscated weapons had included expensive swords and knives, in addition to the pliers they had used to extract several of their victim's fingernails.

Chrestus, commander of Dura's army, stood by the side of the dais. Along the walls were guards, with more flanking the entrance doors to the chamber, so there was no possibility of escape. A fact the two would-be assassins had noted. They were both tall and thin, their long faces accentuating their height. One had thin lips, the other cold eyes.

'You have both been sentenced to death for your assault on the caravan owner,' I began, 'give me one reason why the sentence should not be carried out immediately.'

'We are in the employment of King Spartacus of Gordyene,' thin lips informed me. 'We are searching for Prince Akmon, his son, who disappeared some months ago.' 'I am aware of the disappearance of Prince Akmon,' I said, 'and his father's attempts to find

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him. What has that to do with you torturing an innocent man?'

'Not innocent, majesty,' said cold eyes. 'He had knowledge about the whereabouts of the prince, the first news anyone has heard of the king's son in months.'

'You could have asked him instead of pulling out his fingernails,' I said. 'He wanted gold before he would divulge any information,' thin lips told me. 'And what did he tell you, after you had tortured him?' I asked. 'That the prince had been in Susa before travelling to Dura,' said cold eyes. I shook my head. 'I can assure you Prince Akmon is not in Dura, either the city or the kingdom. I

too have excellent scouts and they would have informed me if the son of the King of Gordyene was here.'

'With respect, majesty,' said thin lips, 'you would be unaware of the prince's presence even in your own city.'

Chrestus had had enough. 'This is a farce, majesty. Kill them and be done with it. They mock you.'

He was right, but I was intrigued. It had been a very dull day filled with listening to petitioners, city officials regaling me with tales of broken sewers, petty boundary disputes, feral dogs in the city and sellers failing to obey rules pertaining to the size of stalls in the fish market. It had been mind-numbingly boring. At least the assassins of Spartacus were interesting. I decided to indulge them.

‘Explain,’ I demanded. They looked furtively at each other before cold eyes spoke, avoiding my own eyes as he did so. ‘King Spartacus informed us before we left Vanadzor that Princess Claudia had cast a spell of

concealment to mask the presence of Prince Akmon.’ Chrestus burst out laughing. ‘Spell of concealment? This is gibberish, majesty. Next they will be

informing us they flew to Dura on the back of a dragon.’ ‘Dragons no longer inhabit the world, general.’ Claudia swept into the throne room from the rear of the chamber, smiling at me as she sat in the

throne next to mine, earning a glare from Chrestus because he knew only the queen was allowed to sit in it. I was looking at the two captives, who for the first time looked alarmed. Clearly Claudia’s reputation preceded her, and they obviously recognised the woman dressed wholly in black who now confronted them.

‘I will ask the princess herself,’ I told them. ‘Claudia, is Prince Akmon in the city of Dura or the Kingdom of Dura?’

‘No,’ she hissed.

‘There you are,’ I said. ‘The prince is not here, and you have tortured a man for nothing. Unless you can offer any other defence for your actions, you will both be hanged.’

‘We are under the protection of the King of Gordyene,’ pleaded thin lips.

‘This is not Gordyene,’ growled Chrestus. Claudia leaned over to whisper

in my ear. 'Before they die, father, I think they may be of use. Indulge me.' Before I could reply she spoke to the captives. 'I know where Prince Akmon and the Lady Lusin are. King Spartacus has promised you much

gold if you find and return his son?' They both nodded.

'And what about Lusin?' she asked. 'The king does not want her,' said cold eyes. Claudia whispered to me once more. 'Will you release them, father, so they may throw Spartacus off the scent?' 'What scent, where is Akmon?' She tapped her nose. 'All will be revealed.' 'I cannot release men who nearly murdered a man,' I told her. 'They will die, that I promise, but first let them aid Akmon.' I was totally confused but sensed Claudia knew what she was talking about. Or perhaps my wits

were dulled after a long day. I nodded to her. She smiled and turned her gaze to the captives. 'Prince Akmon is in the Alborz Mountains, in a village on the lower slopes of Mount Damavand,

living under the assumed name Rabisu.' 'You are free to leave,' I told them. 'But you will depart Dura immediately.' Chrestus was most unhappy, turning to face me. But before he could object I stood and pointed

to their guards. 'Take them away.'

They were roughly bundled from the chamber, Chrestus glaring at Claudia for her unwelcome intercession. She may have been a member of the Scythian Sisters with a formidable reputation, but to him she was merely a woman who had too much to say for herself.

'That was a mistake,' he hissed, most uncomfortable because she had seated herself on Gallia's throne.

'On the contrary, general,' she replied, 'it was most appropriate. Before they gallop off north to claim their prize, they will write to their king

informing him Prince Akmon is in the Alborz Mountains.'

Chrestus was unimpressed. 'So?' 'So, when they get there they will discover before they die that the prince is not there.' I was confused. 'Why would they die?'

Claudia gave me a malicious grin. 'Did you notice the name I said the prince was living under?' 'No.' She rolled her eyes. 'Rabisu is a demon who preys on humans. His name means "the one that lies

in wait". Such is the fear and loathing in which he is held that it is forbidden on pain of death to even mention his name in the Alborz Mountains. So you see they will be killed outright when they arrive.' 'But why inform them Akmon is in the Alborz?' I asked. 'For they will as you say inform their

king he is there.' 'To remind King Spartacus that he offended the gods, that and to increase his suffering,' she

answered. That was Claudia, cold and vindictive. She was not naturally cruel but, like a snake rudely

disturbed, could lash out with venom when provoked. She was also capable of great kindness, such as riding to Gordyene to save the life of Prince Haytham. But like the scorpions that infested the desert there was always a sting in the tail. For Spartacus it had been the relinquishing of the conquests he had achieved at the expense of Media and Armenia, which must have been a bitter decision for him to make. At least he still had two sons at Vanadzor, though the absence and unknown whereabouts of his eldest son Akmon must have tortured both him and Rasha.

Chrestus, hard, unyielding, bowed crisply and took his leave. 'Why are you here, by the way?' I enquired of my daughter. 'The answer to your question is in the courtyard.' Before I had chance to grill her further the palace steward entered the throne room and hobbled

to the dais, bowing his head. 'Are you hurt?' I asked Ashk. 'No, majesty, it is just my leg. Some days are better than others.' My own leg began to ache in sympathy. I knew how he felt. 'Are you taking anything for it?' He smiled at Claudia. 'The princess has kindly prescribed myrrh resin to alleviate the pain, for

which I am eternally grateful.' 'You have been a loyal servant of Dura,' she told him. 'Alas, there is no cure for old age.' 'I would not want to live forever, highness,' he said, 'one life is enough.' I reflected on his words. He was right; one life was enough, as long as it was lived to the full. I

looked at him and at the guards standing at the doors and along the walls and wondered if they regarded their own lives as worthwhile. More likely such views were the preserve of the rich and privileged who had the luxury to indulge such musings.

'You have news?' Claudia asked him. 'The Lord Byrd is outside, highness.'

I stood. 'Bring him to the terrace, and order refreshments from the kitchens.'

He bowed and hobbled away, his left leg obviously giving him some discomfort. Claudia walked with me.

'Myrrh resin?'

'It is resin from the mukul myrrh tree, which is indigenous to India. It is a common cure for the aching limbs of the aged.'

'Perhaps I should use some on my leg.' We left the throne room to enter the private apartments to the rear of the chamber. 'It will not help, father. Your leg aches as a result of an old wound. What does Alcaeus

prescribe?' 'A lotion of aloe oil rubbed on to the leg daily.' 'That will do. Make sure the terrace is empty when Byrd arrives.' 'Why?' 'All will

be revealed.’ I embraced my old scout and friend when he was shown on to the terrace, a large white awning

protecting us from the sun roasting the city, the air hot and windless. Even in the shade it was warm, and Byrd was glad to flop down into a large wicker chair and drink some cool water. The former Cappadocian pot seller had come a long way since his arrival in Parthia some thirty-eight years before. He had been my scout and then chief scout before his ankle had been damaged in a riding accident. As a result, he retired from scouting and took up business, establishing a successful transport guild operating throughout Syria, Judea, western Parthia, Cilicia and Cappadocia. He now had offices in Palmyra, Antioch, Damascus and Emessa, employing dozens of drivers and owning hundreds of camels to transport the goods of his clients over thousands of square miles. And yet he still looked like a vagrant who had not a coin to his name.

‘Noora is well?’ I enquired about his Agraci wife. ‘Well, lord.’ I smiled. For years I had been telling him he should call me Pacorus, a privilege enjoyed by all

the Companions, but in vain. He was as stubborn as a mule and set in his ways. He still lived in a tent even though stone buildings were now springing up in Palmyra as its wealth grew. I had given him and Noora a mansion in the city where they stayed when they visited. I had hoped it might entice them to live in Dura permanently, but it was a forlorn hope, and as a result it stood empty for much of the year.

‘What brings you to Dura?’

He glanced at the reclining Claudia, like him dressed in flowing robes, though his were a dirty brown whereas my daughter always wore black. She smiled at one of the richest men in Palmyra.

‘You can tell him, Byrd.’

‘Tell me what?’

Byrd put down his cup of water and Claudia dismissed the servants from the balcony, holding up a finger to stifle any talk until they had gone.

‘You know what notorious gossips they are.’ ‘King Spartacus’ sword, lord,’ Byrd began. After a long day sitting in an airless throne room I was not in the mood for riddles. ‘What of it?’ ‘I remember seeing it many years ago, when Spartacus was just a boy and when he was sent to

Dura in disgrace. It has silver pommel in shape of horse’s head.’ I relaxed in the chair and closed my heavy eyelids. ‘It is as you say, my friend. And you rode on a camel all the way to Dura in this heat to tell me

that?’ ‘I have seen it in Palmyra, lord.’ The words did not sink in at first and I continued to keep my eyes closed. ‘A young man was wearing it, lord,’ said Byrd, ‘Prince Akmon.’ The name hit me like a bolt of thunder. I jumped up, knocking over my water. ‘What?’ ‘It is true, father,’ said Claudia casually, ‘Akmon is in Palmyra. I told him to get rid of the sword

but men are such sentimental creatures so he kept it. Thus has all my good work been undone.’ I spun to face her.

‘You knew Akmon was in Palmyra?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘And you didn’t think to tell me?’ She gave one of her nonchalant shrugs that could be so infuriating. ‘Why should I? He and Lusin wished to remain anonymous, which they were. Well, until what I

warned would happen happened. Have you informed Malik his nephew is in his city, Byrd?’ ‘No, not yet.’

‘He must know,’ I insisted. ‘Rasha is Malik’s sister and she must have been tortured these past few months by thoughts of what fate might have befallen Akmon.’

Claudia chuckled. ‘You should have been a writer father, such is your vivid imagination. What did you think would happen to a young couple both in possession of their wits, strength and a not inconsiderable amount



of gold?’

I retook my seat, using a cloth to wipe my damp tunic.

‘And now I suppose you will write to King Spartacus and ride to Palmyra to seize the pair prior to returning them to the vengeance of the ruler of Gordyene,’ she said. ‘You do know Akmon does not wish to return to his homeland, father? That is why he is in Palmyra instead of Vanadzor.’

‘He will kill the girl,’ announced Byrd.

‘How perceptive of you, Byrd,’ said Claudia, ‘and you are right. Spartacus will have Lusin killed.’

‘Spartacus can be hot-headed,’ I agreed, ‘but killing the girl?’ ‘He will not forget the humiliation inflicted on him by Lusin,’ Claudia told me. ‘I will go to Palmyra,’ I said. ‘How can the King of Dura travel to Palmyra unseen?’ asked Claudia. ‘Your face is too well-

known there, father, and once it is recognised Malik will want to know why you are in his city.’ ‘It is true, lord,’ agreed Byrd. ‘I cannot just ignore Akmon’s presence in Palmyra,’ I said in exasperation. ‘Perhaps you could meet them in the desert, away from prying eyes,’ suggested Claudia. I raised an eyebrow. ‘Them?’

‘They are a couple, father, where one goes so does the other.’ I looked at Byrd. ‘Can you arrange for them to meet us, my friend?’ ‘They might not agree if they know the King of Dura wants to see them, lord. They will suspect

trap. You are King Spartacus’ uncle, lord.’ ‘Tell them Princess Claudia will guarantee their safety,’ said my daughter. ‘That should suffice.’ I was far from happy. ‘This is highly irregular.’ ‘On the contrary, father, it all makes perfect sense. The approaching celebrations mean Spartacus

and Rasha will soon be arriving at Dura. All will be settled.’ She was referring to my sixtieth birthday celebrations, which had taken on a life of

their own

since Gallia had first proposed commemorating me reaching sixty. A few friends gathering at Dura had been a pleasing prospect, especially as I seemed to see less and less of them as the years passed. But now a veritable army was set to gather in my capital, validating the old saying that you should be careful what you wish for.

Before I left for the clandestine desert rendezvous word reached Dura that Mark Antony had been defeated by the forces of Octavian in a great naval battle near a place called Actium. He and Cleopatra both survived the battle and had fled back to Egypt, pursued by a victorious Octavian.

‘What does that mean for us?’ asked Gallia.

I had informed her about Akmon’s presence in Palmyra as soon as she had returned from her tour of the north of the kingdom, which was just an excuse to be feted and feasted by Kalet and my

other rapacious lords. She had taken Eszter with her, who had decided to stay in Kalet’s household and enjoy the company of his strapping sons for a while longer.

‘Nothing immediately,’ I answered.

‘But if Octavian kills Mark Antony then he will be the sole ruler of the Roman world and Parthia will face a united enemy.’

I nodded. ‘Yes.’ Gallia pointed to the west. ‘And Dura will be the first to feel the wrath of Rome.’ ‘Not necessarily. Rome has just fought a long civil war, and if Mark Antony and Cleopatra

manage to raise more forces it may yet continue.’ ‘Mark Antony will soon be dead,’ said Claudia flatly. We turned to look at her, her face hard and impassive. ‘The gods do not forget one who has robbed from them.’ ‘Is Spartacus to die also?’ asked Gallia. ‘He also robbed from a temple.’ ‘Spartacus redeemed himself, mother. He chased the Romans

out of Parthia and assisted in their

eviction from Armenia. Furthermore, he gave up his ridiculous ambitions to be a new Tigranes the Great, with an empire from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean. The lion of Gordyene is back in its cage.’

‘Having invaded Parthia three times in the last twenty-five years and come to grief on each occasion,’ I said, ‘I think the Romans will think twice before attempting a fourth incursion.’

‘They say this Octavian is intelligent and calculating,’ said Claudia. ‘That being the case, he will seek to consolidate his power before launching any foreign wars.’

‘We should keep our swords sharp,’ hissed Gallia.

I nodded but in truth there had been a long peace on the border with Syria. After having marched directly east to first try to capture Dura, followed by Crassus’ strike into the heart of Parthia, the Romans had seemingly given up on the idea of marching across the deserts of Mesopotamia to defeat us. Such a strategy played right into our hands for we were always able to use our main strength – our horse archers and cataphracts – to isolate and surround the legions, which had no answer to our mobility on the desert plains. Mark Antony had tried a different strategy, which in theory utilised the strengths of the legions and reduced the effectiveness of Parthia’s mounted soldiers. The mountains and hills of northern Parthia certainly limited the scope for horsemen, it is true, and Mark Antony’s plan to establish a base from which to launch operations was militarily sound. But the loss of his siege engines meant he failed to capture Phraaspa and had to withdraw back to Armenia. He *had* established a base during his second campaign against Parthia following his treaty of friendship with Media, and his victory against Phraates near Irbil had momentarily threatened to split the empire in two. But the intercession of Spartacus had saved the day and my nephew’s drubbing of the army of Media and its

Roman allies at Mepsila had ensured Mark Antony’s dreams were dashed.

The *triumvir* was forced to leave Media to prepare for his clash with Octavian, leaving Spartacus and Phraates free to liberate Armenia and install a puppet king on its throne.

‘We are here.’

It was late afternoon and the limestone hills in the distance were turning from yellowish-grey to a lustrous purple as the sun began to descend in the west. The spot chosen for our camp was beside a dry watercourse well away from the Dura-to-Palmyra road that was always filled with dozens of caravans, which usually made camp by the side of the road. So busy was the route legend had it at night the whole distance between my city and Malik’s great oasis capital was illuminated by campfires. I had never seen such a thing and neither had Gallia, Malik or indeed anyone else we spoke to. But it became common knowledge and passed into folklore.

The desert was beautiful at this time of day, the sun casting long shadows and the harsh yellow surface of gravel, sand and glittering dried mud turning mauve and red as the heat abated. We unsaddled the horses and pitched the tents; Zenobia, the commander of the Amazons, organising sentries from the fifty of her women she had brought with her. I was one of the few men in the party, the others being male servants who organised the preparation of meals and the pitching of the royal tent. Kalet and the other lords mocked me for being escorted by women horse archers, but I never regarded the Amazons as second-rate. Every one of them could shoot a bow as well as any male horse archer in my army and every one of them would lay down their life for their queen, and king, without hesitation.

Byrd arrived the next day, riding a camel and escorted by a score of black-clad Agraci warriors on horseback, their faces obscured by *shemaghs*. There were two other riders, both dressed like the Agraci, one wearing a sword with a silver horse head pommel. Claudia walked from her tent to greet Akmon and Lusin once they had dismounted from their horses, also embracing Byrd once he had alighted from his camel. I stood with Gallia in the shadows of our tent’s interior as Claudia led the couple and Byrd

towards us, the Agraci taking up position around their horses and Byrd's camel.

We stood in the middle of the tent to greet Akmon and Lusin, the former's grey eyes opening wide in alarm when he spotted us. He placed himself in front of Lusin and drew his sword.

'What treachery is this?' I threw up my hands. 'Calm yourself, Akmon, we mean you no harm.' 'No harm?' he spat. 'Why then were we lured here under false pretences?' Claudia stood in front of him, her dark eyes boring into him. 'Put away your sword. If my father wanted you dead your body would be rotting on the desert

floor by now, pierced by arrows. I give you my word you are safe. Have I not served you well thus far? Look, if my father tries anything untoward, I will turn him into a lizard.'

Byrd laughed, which broke the tension. Lusin gazed lovingly into Akmon's eyes and whispered into his ear. He slipped the sword back into his scabbard.

'Please,' I said, 'let us sit and take refreshments. Take the weight off your feet. Lusin, do you wish to wash? We have a tent set aside for you both.'

She gave me a dazzling smile. 'Thank you, majesty, my husband and I would like to wash the desert from our faces.'

I glanced at Gallia who gave me a knowing look. So they were married. Clearly it was more than a teenage infatuation

'How old are they?' I asked Claudia after a servant had shown them to their tent. 'Akmon is twenty-one; Lusin a year younger.' 'You knew they were married?' asked Gallia. 'Oh, yes, I attended their wedding.'

I groaned. 'You could have told us all this, Claudia. Sometimes you drive me to distraction. Now they are married Akmon will be even more reluctant to return to Gordyene.'

‘Akmon will never return to Gordyene,’ stated Claudia, ‘his destiny lies elsewhere.’ ‘Spartacus won’t like that,’ said Gallia. Claudia curled her lip. ‘Spartacus is a fool. Had he not abducted Lusin his son would not have fallen in love with her. But like a small child hankering after a new toy he desired to have ukku swords for his soldiers to play with. Well, he has his swords and the price was his eldest son. Of course the blame rests with you, father.’

‘Me? How am I to blame?’

‘Boasting about your own ukku swords and your armouries, giving him a glimpse of what he could have if only he had the gold. Planting the seed in his mind of a greater Gordyene, feared and revered in equal measure.’

‘I hardly think a tour of Dura’s armouries set in motion the events of the last couple of years,’ I protested.

‘How little you know of your nephew, father.’ ‘He will take a dim view of his son marrying an Armenian,’ said Gallia. Claudia nodded. ‘Dim. That is a very apt word to describe the King of Gordyene, mother.’ She looked at me. ‘But then men can be blunt instruments. Lucky for you, father, you have

strong women around you.’ I decided attack was the best form of defence. ‘I was talking to Aaron the other day and he told

me an interesting story. He believes his god made the world in seven days and then rested, after which he created man and again rested. It strikes me that after his god had made woman no one has rested.’

Claudia walked away with disgust and Gallia gave me a hard dig in the ribs, but it was a point well made, I thought.

It was the Agraci custom to eat meals seated cross-legged in a circle on the floor, the food consumed with fingers. Whenever we were in Palmyra we adhered to the custom but when I was entertaining in my own tent we

sat at a table to save my legs and back. The tent itself was woven from goat's hair, which meant the atmosphere inside was cool despite the outside surface being hot to the touch under the desert sun. That sun was waning when Akmon and Lusin made an appearance, Gallia welcoming the wife of Gordyene's crown prince. Threading her arm in the young woman's she led her to the table. Claudia embraced her, and they shared a few quiet words. There was clearly a bond between them and between Akmon and my daughter.

The two guests bowed their heads to me. I in turn asked them to be seated. Lusin was pretty enough with a heart-shaped face and long chestnut curls. She was tall like Akmon and both had lean frames. They made an attractive couple.

Because wood is at a premium in the desert we ate goat and rice cooked on a camel dung campfire, washed down with wine and accompanied by bread, dates and yoghurt. Both our guests had a hearty appetite, which made me wonder if they had been living a pauper's life in Palmyra.

'What are your plans?' I asked Akmon. 'I have been informed you are reluctant to return to Gordyene.'

'We will never return to Gordyene,' he told me. 'We were hoping to stay in Palmyra, majesty,' said Lusin. 'Impossible,' I said, tipping my head to Byrd. 'My friend discovered your presence and it is only

a matter of time before Malik is told you are in his city.' 'Then we will go to Syria,' announced Akmon. 'With what?' I asked. 'We have gold,' Akmon informed me, 'enough to buy a new life.' 'You should not go to Syria,' said Gallia, 'it is a Roman province and Parthians, and Armenians, are held in suspicion there.' 'We are just a husband and wife seeking a place to build a life, majesty,' smiled Lusin. She really was most charming, I could see why Akmon had fallen in love with her. 'You may go where you will,' announced Claudia, 'for you have the gods' protection.' I frowned at her. 'Be that as it may, Rasha, Queen Rasha, is

very dear to us and it grieves me and

my wife that you will leave these lands without at least telling her you are both safe and well.’ ‘And your father,’ added Gallia. ‘He will not miss me,’ said Akmon. I shovelled some rice into my mouth, using my fingers in the Agraci style.

‘I have an idea. Your father and mother will soon be arriving at Dura for my birthday celebrations.’

Akmon raised his wooden cup. ‘Sixty years, majesty.’ ‘You look younger,’ smiled Lusin. She was very disarming, but my aching leg, thinning hair and lined face told a different story. ‘You are very kind. Why don’t you both come to Dura and stay in the palace?’ ‘No,’ said Akmon flatly. ‘We will not be kept like caged animals until my father arrives, so he

can take us back to Gordyene in chains.’ I was shocked by the animosity he displayed towards Spartacus. ‘At least inform King Malik you reside in Palmyra,’ I pleaded. ‘He is, after all, your uncle.’ Lusin laid a hand on Akmon’s arm. ‘For the sake of your mother.’ ‘But he will inform my mother, which will bring my father’s scouts. There is a price on our

heads.’ ‘Two of your father’s scouts were at Dura only days ago,’ I told them. ‘They were sent away on a fool’s errand,’ Claudia reassured them. ‘Princess,’ said Lusin, ‘you have been our guide and protector. What do you advise?’ Claudia washed her hands in a bowl of water and dried them with a towel. ‘My father will not imprison you but I can understand your reluctance to be in his city. There are

numerous small forts in my father’s kingdom, spaced at five-mile intervals north and south of the city. Perhaps you could stay in one near Dura and when your parents visit, you can decide if you wish to see them.’

Akmon weighed up the offer in his mind, staring at the tabletop as he did



so. ‘What of your parents, Lusin?’ enquired Gallia. ‘You mean the people who tried to sell me to a fat, disgusting old Babylonian, majesty?’ she

answered coldly. ‘They are dead to me.’ There was obviously steel beneath her attractive features. ‘Well at least think about my offer,’ I said. ‘We will think about it,’ replied Akmon without enthusiasm. I took a sip of wine. ‘I knew the man you were named after. I can see him now, a squat, rock-like

Thracian with a savage scar across his face. It took a long time to win his respect, I can tell you. He was Spartacus’ second-in-command and helped to forge his army into a formidable instrument.’

I took another sip and prepared to wax lyrical about the triumphs of the slave army but was stopped in my tracks by the blank expression on the faces of Akmon and Lusin. What were men long dead to them? I suddenly felt very old.

‘It would be best for you to stay in King Pacorus’ kingdom from now on,’ advised Byrd. ‘King Malik is my friend and I cannot keep the presence of his nephew in his city a secret.’

‘Then we will go to Syria, only earlier than planned,’ said Akmon.

‘Perhaps there might be another option,’ said Claudia. ‘I’m sure Lord Kalet has a spare room in his stronghold where Akmon and Lusin could stay until they decide what to do.’

Akmon was suspicious. ‘Who is Kalet?’ ‘One of my lords,’ I told him, ‘who has an irreverent attitude to protocol.’ ‘No,’ answered Akmon, ‘we will stay in Palmyra and if Lord Byrd informs the king then we will

go to Syria.’ We continued to plead and offer alternative places for them to stay but Akmon was adamant he

and Lusin would be staying in Malik’s city. The next day they travelled

back to Palmyra in the company of Byrd, who promised to keep an eye on them and told me he would find them a place to live in Damascus if they did indeed leave Agraci lands. I offered my hand to Akmon as he stood beside his horse. He took it.

‘My father has made Gordyene a strong kingdom, majesty, just as you have turned Dura from a lawless land into one of the greatest kingdoms in the empire. But whereas you have harnessed the riches of the Silk Road to create and maintain your army, Gordyene does not benefit from such a gift. So my father plunders lands beyond his borders to fill his treasury. In this he has been successful and now his army is feared and respected throughout Parthia. Did you know High King Phraates paid him a thousand talents of gold for his aid in evicting the Romans from Media?’

‘I did not.’

‘He once ordered me to crucify some Roman prisoners in revenge for the murder of civilians in eastern Gordyene.’

He hauled himself into the saddle. ‘I would not do it. In that moment, I realised I am not my father. He was born with a talent for violence and war, but I do not wish to spend my life butchering people.’

I stood and watched them fade into the desert haze and reflected on his words. I thought about all the men who had died in the campaigns I had waged. How many tens of thousands had died at my hands over the years? Were kings and generals really nothing more than butchers? I reflected on this during the ride back to Dura, that and wondering what would be Malik’s reaction when he discovered his nephew was living in Palmyra.

‘Hopefully he will not arrest him and send him back to Gordyene,’ I said aloud. ‘What?’ asked Gallia. ‘I was just thinking about Malik and what he will do about Akmon and Lusin.’ ‘Why should he do anything?’ said Claudia.

‘He might ship them off to Gordyene.’

‘I doubt he cares either way,’ surmised Claudia. ‘What are the family squabbles of a kingdom hundreds of miles away to him? A more pertinent question is what will be the reaction of Spartacus when he discovers you did not inform him of his son’s presence at Palmyra. Perhaps he will chop off your head with his new sword, father.’

I pulled up *Tegha*. ‘Haven’t you got a meeting of the witches to attend?’ She gave me a smug smile. ‘No, father, I’m all yours for the foreseeable future.’ I nudged *Tegha* ahead. ‘Marvellous.’