

Chapter 1

All is as the gods will it.

I wondered how many would return.

I stood by a date palm and watched five hundred horsemen and their many camels carrying tents and supplies, plus bows and arrows to arm the Ma'adan, trot south, their destination being Fort Kur at the end of the line of forts that kept watch on the Euphrates and guarded my kingdom against incursions from desert raiders. From there they would cross the Euphrates using a pontoon bridge and ride south to link up with the Ma'adan who were fighting a losing war against Sanabares, King of Mesene and the individual who had also waged a war against Dura. It had been a proxy war, of course, befitting a man who never got his hands dirty and who liked to operate in the shadows. A close friend of King of Kings Phraates, another despicable individual with a warped sense of honour, he had tried to establish a new Silk Road running through his own kingdom and on to a place called Rutba, from where the camel caravans would travel on to Judea and Egypt. This he was perfectly entitled to do, and it would not have concerned me at all, had it not been for his alliance with a Bedouin leader called Abs ibn Baghid. He and Sanabares had conspired not only to devise a new Silk Road route but also bring Dura low, unleashing raiders against the road from Dura to Palmyra and sending assassins to Dura to kill me and members of my family. Their scheme had ended in failure with the defeat of Abs and his army at Rutba. But Sanabares still sat on his throne, fully supported by Phraates who had endorsed the plan to weaken Dura.

I hated Sanabares, not only for being a dishonourable, duplicitous king, but also because he had reduced me to his level. As the horsemen faded into the distance, I cursed the King of Mesene. His actions had forced me to retaliate by sending the leader of the exiles from Mesene, Chares, with two hundred and fifty of his men to link up with the Ma'adan and wage war against Sanabares, his officials and his soldiers. Accompanying Chares was Saif, the leader of Dura's lords, and two hundred and fifty men drawn from his own followers and the retainers of other lords. All were volunteers, and all single, because I did not believe many would return and I did not want an army of grieving widows left behind.

How noble of you, Pacorus.

'Shut up.'

After the brazen audacity of Sanabares against a fellow Parthian king, I had no choice but to retaliate. He was already waging war on the Ma'adan, the inhabitants of the marshes in the south of his kingdom who had been active supporters of my friend Nergal when he had been

King of Mesene. The same Nergal who had died fighting to preserve the reign of Phraates. The high king appointing a former satrap lackey to sit on Uruk's throne had left a bitter taste in my mouth, and in truth I wanted Sanabares dead. I was cheered by the thought that one of the arrows being transported to the Ma'adan might strike him down. One day. More likely the war against the Ma'adan would rage on for years while Sanabares sat in his palace gorging himself on rich food and young boys. Was he a boy-lover? It pleased me to think so, but the truth was I had never even met him. I knew not what he looked like or what his tastes were, only that he was my mortal enemy. And enemies fight each other. I sighed and turned away from the column that was now a speck on the shimmering horizon to see a figure standing before me.

I reached for my sword but the individual removed the hood concealing his face to reveal a man with white hair and pale skin wearing a shining scale cuirass, exactly the same as the one I was wearing. It had not been made by mortal man and neither had the one opposite. I relaxed.

'We meet again, King Pacorus.'

His voice was soft, reassuring, though I wondered why an immortal was standing before me in human form.

'Your servant, lord.'

'Will you have a drink with me, King Pacorus?'

'A drink?'

We were on the edge of an expanse of date palms hugging the bank of the Euphrates. Gallia and the Amazons had led their horses through the trees to allow the animals to drink, the queen taking my own horse, Horns, to the river. There were no houses nearby, but Girra, God of Fire and Light, extended an arm towards the trees.

'After you.'

I took a few steps and found myself in a clearing where a magnificent pavilion was pitched. Surrounded by long yellow cloth screens, the pavilion itself was crimson with gold guy ropes. A large awning extended from the open entrance, a red carpet beneath it and on the carpet two couches with silver legs and gold cushions. There was a simple wooden table between the couches, on which were two golden chalices. I looked around, not wondering how such an opulent pavilion could have been pitched without me knowing about it, for the works of the gods are beyond the understanding of mortals, but, rather, looking for servants. There were none, just as that day long ago when Gallia and I had stumbled into another strange camp devoid of servants.

'Please be seated,' Girra told me.

He sat on a couch and I did the same, his pale grey eyes not leaving me.

'You look tired, King Pacorus.'

'I have been fighting for over forty years and I had hoped my autumn years would be free from conflict now the empire's borders are secure. I was wrong.'

I looked at the chalices on the table and saw they were both full of what appeared to be wine.

'A warrior will never be able to leave his sword at home, King Pacorus. It is the natural order of things. The decades have passed quickly?'

'In the blink of an eye.'

'We have been observing your progress with interest, and have decided to reward you, not for your services to Parthia or your victories, but because you have never begged for our help.'

'Thank you, divinity.'

I wondered what the reward would be. Parthia was at peace, its borders secure. Gallia was healthy and all my daughters were well, though I worried about Claudia at Ctesiphon. I was too old to produce more children, and in any case neither myself nor Gallia wanted the exhaustion that came with raising infants and small children.

'It is not another child,' Girra assured me. He extended his arm and pushed one of the chalices a few inches in my direction.

'We offer you the chance to see your friends again, to speak with them, laugh with them and enjoy their company, for we know that you miss them dearly.'

I stared in wonder at the liquid in the chalice. It was obviously not wine.

'And all I have to do is drink this magic potion?'

'It is wine, King Pacorus. But, yes, by drinking it you will be granted your wish.'

I reached out to take the chalice but then hesitated.

'Forgive me, divinity, but most of my friends died in their prime or before, and if they are brought back to life, I will be an old man in their eyes.'

Girra cracked a half-smile.

'They are not being brought back to life. You will be taken back to another time, similar to the one you remember, but also different.'

I was intrigued but nervous at the same time. I never questioned whether what he was saying was possible, for the gods are capable of things men cannot even conceive. But would it be a one-way journey?

'You hesitate, King Pacorus? Is what we are offering not to your liking?'

'I – I cannot find the words to thank you, divinity. But what about my younger self? How will he react to me appearing in his midst?'

'You will be your former self.'

'Then I accept.'

I picked up the chalice and raised it to my lips.

'On more thing, King Pacorus. Know that there is no such thing as an earthly paradise, neither in this time or in any other. Do not expect miracles.'

'What you are offering is a miracle, divinity,' I replied, taking a small sip of the liquid.

It was wine, excellent wine but wine, nevertheless. I took another sip and found the taste delightful, all the time Girra's eyes on me. I emptied the chalice and placed it back on the table. I looked around to see if anything had changed. Nothing had. I closed my eyes and concentrated. Nothing.

'Go back to your palace, King Pacorus, and act normally. All will be revealed; that I promise.'

I rose and bowed my head at him.

'Thank you, divinity.'

'*Thank you*, King Pacorus, for your devotion and duty. One more thing. Do not tell anyone of what has been spoken of here. Especially your wife. She will not understand and will become angry.'

'I keep no secrets from my wife.'

Girra shrugged. 'If you tell her then the gift will be withdrawn. That is our only condition.'

I made to speak but he cut me short.

'Farewell, King Pacorus.'

I walked from the enclosure towards the trees, beyond which Gallia and the Amazons would be waiting. I turned to catch a last glimpse of Girra and his opulent pavilion and saw only date palms. Gallia was waiting with Horns, and behind her Minu and the Amazons sat in their saddles.

'Where have you been?' she asked.

'Call of nature.'

I took the reins and gained the saddle, turning Horns to head back to Dura.

'You seem troubled.'

I was, but not about Chares, Saif and the rest of the horsemen on their way to Mesene.

'Do you think I am making the right decision?'

Her blue eyes looked at me. 'For striking back at Sanabares? Absolutely. If you did nothing you would appear weak, not only in his eyes but also in the eyes of others who might be thinking of striking at Dura.'

I smiled. Her words were reassuring.

‘We would have been saved a lot of blood and trouble if Nergal and Praxima still ruled Mesene.’

She gave me a quizzical look.

‘What an odd thing to say.’

I pulled up Horns and turned him, Minu raising her hand to bring the Amazons behind us to a stop.

‘Haya,’ I shouted. ‘Report to me.’

She appeared behind Minu, a file commander in the Amazons and the young woman who was going to marry Navid, the horse archer commander who was making a name for himself. She steered her horse towards me, Minu looking at Gallia who gave her a bemused look. Haya halted before me and saluted, her face mostly covered by her helmet and its large cheek guards.

‘Remove your helmet,’ I commanded.

She did so to reveal an attractive woman with a heart-shaped face with flawless olive skin and lustrous brown eyes. Like all the Amazons, her long hair was arranged in a plait down her back. Her face was indeed flawless, but my eyes went to a small scar on her neck, a memento of when an arrow had struck her and killed her, only for the goddess, Ishtar, to restore her to life.

‘How are you, Haya?’

‘Er, well, majesty, thank you.’

‘Anything unusual happened to you recently? No strangers appearing out of thin air, so to speak?’

‘I do not understand, majesty.’

‘What is all this about, Pacorus?’ Gallia asked me.

Minu nudged her horse forward. ‘Is anything wrong, majesty?’

I wanted to ask Haya if she had been visited by the goddess and if she had received any wisdom of any kind. But her blank expression told me the answer.

‘Well, I can see that you are fine,’ I smiled.

‘Why shouldn’t she be?’ asked Gallia, irritation in her voice.

‘Well, as you were, Haya,’ I said. ‘As long as you are fine then I am fine.’

Gallia turned her horse. ‘That is debatable.’

I said nothing to Gallia that evening as we ate our evening meal and then retired to bed after relaxing on the palace terrace after a highly unusual day. Neither of us remarked on the despatch of the reinforcements to the Ma’adan. It was done now, for better or for worse. There had been

soldiers from Mesene at the Battle of Rutba and I was within my rights to launch a full-scale campaign against King Sanabares in retaliation for his alliance with Abs. I lay on the bed with Gallia sleeping beside me, the meeting with Girra churning in my mind. The night was still and quiet, the soft breathing of my wife the only sound in the room. For some reason my thoughts kept returning to Nergal and Praxima, both of whom had been dead for six years, and yet in many ways it seemed like yesterday. If only my two friends still lived and still ruled Mesene. Sanabares would still be a minor satrap in Susiana and many lives would have been saved. I began to feel drowsy, the mental exertions of the day coming home to roost.

'I miss you, my friends,' were my last words as I drifted into a fitful sleep.

I woke with a start. It was morning, thin shards of sunlight lancing through the shuttered balcony doors of our bedroom to announce another sunny day in the Kingdom of Dura. I stretched out my arms and froze. I stared at my hands, which appeared free of wrinkles and age spots. But in the dim light of the room my eyes may have been playing tricks on me. I jumped out of bed and rushed to the doors, opening one to allow sunlight to flood into the room. I stood naked and examined my hands and arms, which were smooth and muscular. I clenched a fist and hooted with delight.

'What are you doing?'

Gallia was sitting up in bed, rubbing her eyes, her upper body naked and exposed. My eyes nearly popped out of my head. This was a younger, more nubile Gallia, her breasts pert and firm, her arms toned and her belly flat. I beamed with delight and rushed over to her in a state of arousal. I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her on the lips, then her face, neck and breasts.

'And good morning to you,' she cooed.

I pulled the sheet off to reveal her magnificent nakedness.

'What about training?' she asked.

Early morning training sessions with the Amazons was almost a religious ritual.

'Training is cancelled today,' I leered.

The morning disappeared in a blur of lovemaking; our bodies entwined in a frenzy of passion as I pushed my body to its limits. It was a powerful, vibrant body, full of stamina and physical strength, a toned, honed weapon that duelled with its female counterpart in a contest I did not want to end. But eventually the delicious bout reached its climax, Gallia's moans and screams reverberating around the room. She rolled off me and lay on her back, panting, her body beaded with sweat. And what a body. It resembled something that a sculptor had carved from a block of white marble.

There was a knock at the door.

‘Unless you have food and drink, go away,’ I shouted, Gallia picking the sheet off the floor and covering herself.

‘Apologies, majesty, but Commander Zenobia is in the throne room enquiring as to the queen’s health.’

Zenobia? The commander of the Amazons? Alive? I jumped off the bed and raced to the door, opening it to a startled legionary officer, helmet in the crook of his arm.

‘Zenobia is in the throne room?’

The officer was wide-eyed. ‘Er, yes, majesty. She wishes to know if the queen is unwell.’

I gave him a mischievous grin.

‘A little drained, perhaps, but apart from that, like a goddess.’

‘Tell her to report to me at the stables in two hours,’ Gallia told him.

The officer saluted, bowed his head to me and marched back down the corridor.

‘Pacorus,’ said Gallia.

I turned to her. ‘Yes, love of my life.’

‘You realise you are naked. To his credit he did not bat an eyelid. Domitus would have been proud.’

I closed the door.

‘Domitus?’

She rose from the bed and put on a gown.

‘The man who has forged your army into the formidable instrument it is today. I know he is in Persis, but surely you have not forgotten him.’

‘Domitus is in Persis?’

She looked at me as though I were mad.

I was suddenly ravenously hungry and so we dressed and made our way to the palace terrace, which was exactly the same as it had been the day before, during my ‘normal life’. My mind was awash with questions but I resisted the temptation to shower Gallia with queries. I could not stop looking at her: her beautiful face, her blonde hair, which was no longer streaked with grey, her sensuous, lithe body, and her enticing, blue eyes. After a while she found it irritating and rebuked me as we ate a very late breakfast under the awning that shielded us from the sun. The sky was cloudless and it was another hot day, the Euphrates below blue and slow moving as it made its way to the Persian Gulf. There were no fishing boats on the river in the stifling heat of midday. Fisherman always rose early to haul in their catches to sell in the city markets well before morning had ended.

Servants sweated in the heat as they served us dates, bread, honey, yoghurt and freshly squeezed fruit juice.

'I will convene a meeting of the council,' I announced, dipping a piece of bread in a pot of honey.

'We had a council meeting two days ago,' she informed me. 'It is supposed to be a weekly event.'

But I wanted to see all those I had grown old with and so sent the palace steward to inform the council members to come to the Citadel later that afternoon. I took a sip of fruit juice.

'I promised Claudia I would help her choose the jewellery to wear at her wedding,' Gallia told me. 'She will be disappointed.'

'Wedding?'

She rolled her eyes. 'The marriage of our eldest daughter might be a trivial matter to you, but for her, and the kingdom, her forthcoming betrothal to Prince Phraates is a great event.'

I spat out the fruit juice, to Gallia's horror.

'What is the matter with you, Pacorus?'

I coughed to expel the last of the juice from my throat in a most unedifying spectacle.

'Claudia is marrying Phraates?'

'As you were the one who arranged it, I am surprised by your question.'

I thought of the duplicitous, arrogant, untrustworthy creature that I had spent half my life supporting and loathing in equal measure. The viper who had made his nest at the serpents' pit that was Ctesiphon.

'As you yourself said,' continued Gallia, 'he is a kind, gentle young man who will make a fine husband for Claudia.'

'I said that?'

'Are you feeling unwell, Pacorus? You don't seem yourself today.'

I gave her a mischievous grin. 'You weren't complaining earlier.'

Her expression hardened. 'Don't be crude.'

'Father!'

A teenage Eszter, her face half covered by an unruly mop of hair, bounded onto the terrace, sitting down beside me and scooping up a handful of dates. Her dark complexion and darker eyes made her look more like an Agraci girl than a Parthian, which was ironic as she would end up marrying one of the desert people. But now she was just a wild-eyed child with a rebellious nature.

'You said that if I acted as a stable hand for a month I could have a white stallion, father. Well, the month is up.'

I looked at Gallia who smiled and nodded. 'She's right.'

'A white stallion? That would bankrupt the treasury,' I smiled.

Parthians traditionally rode Niseans, a breed of horse possessed of great strength and endurance. It was Niseans that carried cataphracts in battle, and the kings and lords of the empire. They originated from the town of Nisaia in the Nisean Plain at the foot of the Zagros Mountains, thereafter spreading west as rulers desired the breed for their mounted troops. Bucephalus, the fabled horse of Alexander of Macedon, had been a Nisean. The usual colours of the breed were dark bay, chestnut and brown, though rarer colours included black, roan, palomino and spotted patterns. But never white. Some were spotted like a leopard or as golden as a newly minted coin. As well as being tall and powerful, they had bony knobs on their foreheads, often referred to as 'horns'.

In the western kingdoms of the empire, horses were mainly derived from the breeds of the Agraci and Bedouin and could be found in the armies of Hatra, Dura, Media, Babylon, Mesene and Gordyene. This was the result of decades of raids to capture not only horses but also slaves. Indeed, my brother Gafarn, King of Hatra, was once a Bedouin who had been my personal slave when I had been a young prince in the city of my birth. The horses of the peoples who lived east of the Euphrates were distinctive in having comparatively small heads, long, arched necks, short backs and deep chests. Like the Niseans they had incredible endurance but being slightly smaller they were ideal for carrying horse archers and scouts. No Parthian king, aside from the ruler of Dura, would admit that the mounts of their horse archers were descended from the horses of the detested Agraci and Bedouin. But it was true, nevertheless. And like the Niseans there were no whites among them.

'Only Hatra's royal bodyguard ride white horses,' I told Eszter, 'and not only are they very expensive, but it is also forbidden to export any whites to another kingdom, on pain of death.'

Eszter shoved two dates into her mouth and chewed on them for a few moments.

'You did promise me a horse, father.'

I obviously had no knowledge of the conversation, having only recently 'arrived' in this version of Dura.

'You can have a horse from the royal stables,' I told her. 'Just ask the Master of Horses to provide you with one.'

Her gaze went from me to Gallia and back again.

'Any horse?'

‘Of course.’

‘But you must care for it on a daily basis,’ Gallia cautioned her. ‘A horse is not a toy to be discarded when you get bored with it.’

‘It certainly is not,’ I concurred.

Eszter beamed with delight. ‘Then I choose Remus.’

I dropped my bread soaked with honey into my lap.

‘Remus?’

‘You did say I could have any horse, father.’

I was not listening. ‘Remus is here?’

‘Where else would he be?’ said Gallia.

‘I must see him,’ I told her, leaving them both, to depart the terrace and enter the palace, pacing through the empty throne room, reception hall, porch and descending the steps to the courtyard. The Citadel covered three and a half acres and included not only the palace but also barracks, workshops, bakery, granary, armouries, treasury, Headquarters Building and stables. It was a self-contained stronghold in the highest part of the city, constructed on the edge of the escarpment on which Dura Europos was built. The barracks for legionaries and horse archers were a poor relation compared to the stables that housed the horses for the Amazons that were always in residence, plus the mounts of the companies of cataphracts and horse archers that were rotated through the Citadel on a regular basis.

Legionaries patrolled the walls and stood guard at the open gates to stop carts and examine their cargoes before being allowed admittance. I made my way to the stables, which were a hive of activity compared to the almost deserted courtyard. All the stables were painted white to reflect the sun to keep the interiors of all the blocks cool for the horses. Stable hands stopped what they were doing to bow to me before resuming their tasks. In every other Parthian city they would have been slaves but in Dura every labourer in the Citadel was a free man or woman. I halted. What if this Dura was filled with slaves? I looked around at stable hands pushing wheelbarrows filled with horse dung.

‘Can I help you, majesty?’

I recognised the elderly Master of Horses standing before me from the time when I had first arrived at Dura. He had died ten years after I became king. He had a leathery face, sinewy arms and a mind filled with a lifetime’s knowledge about horses. Such individuals were treated like demi-gods throughout the empire because they ensured the smooth running of not only stables, but stud farms that produced a continuous supply of horses for every kingdom.

‘Fine, thank you. I’m here to see Remus.’

I said his name but did not really believe he would be here.

‘Of course, majesty. Will you want him saddled?’

‘No, I just wanted to ensure he is well.’

His face registered surprise. I thought quickly.

‘Princess Eszter has her eyes on him, and I thought she might have spirited him away.’

‘Ah, I see. Rest assured he is in his stall safe and sound.’

I followed him to the block where, just yesterday, I had left Horns after bidding farewell to Chares and Saif. Each block was purposely spacious and airy, with windows in each stall and skylights in the ceiling to prevent horses getting overheated, and to get rid of any moisture that could adversely affect their health. The stalls themselves had smooth walls with no protrusions or sharp edges that could wound an animal. Similarly, door latches were smooth and recessed to prevent a horse gouging himself as he entered and exited a stall. Hay racks were positioned for easy feeding and the dirt floors were covered with lots of bedding, which was changed on a daily basis.

I was nervous as I approached the stall where I had always kept my horse. It was no different from the other stalls, having a door with a wooden lower half and a half-grill above to allow the horse to poke his head out should he so desire. Would he recognise me after all these years? But it was not years since I had seen him. I still had difficulty wrapping my mind around the miracle that had been performed for my benefit. I walked up to the stall and there he was: a white horse with blue eyes, muscular shoulders, thick neck and an erect, proud head. He grunted when he saw me entering his stall, resting his head on my shoulder in a display of trust and affection. My eyes moistened with tears as I stroked his head and looked into his eyes.

‘Hello, boy. You cannot imagine how good it is to see you.’

I stayed with him for a long time, stroking his neck and talking softly to him. I told him about the meeting with Girra, the magical pavilion that vanished when the god had finished speaking to me, and the great miracle the immortals had worked to transport me back to a time when I had been younger, stronger and surrounded by my friends. I told him all this because no human would believe my story, not even Gallia. And so, Remus became my confidante and I felt a burden lift from my shoulders.

The meeting of the council in the Headquarters Building was a sheer delight. All those who had helped turn the Kingdom of Dura into a bulwark of the empire were present, all younger and full of life. The oldest was Rsan, the city governor, the first individual Gallia and I had seen when we had arrived at Dura after King of Kings Sinatruces had gifted me a wild kingdom on the western side of the Euphrates. He was serious, slightly aloof but far from frail

and did not need a stick to help him walk. His sparring partner at council meetings, Chrestus, commander of the army, was in his prime. There was not a shred of fat on him and he looked fiercer and more intimidating than our last meeting a few days ago, or a few decades, rather.

Aaron, the kingdom's treasurer, had his black hair back, looking just like the man I had first encountered in Haytham's tent at the oasis of Palmyra. He had been a rebel Jewish leader then and had almost ended up nailed to a Roman cross. But I had saved him and brought him to Dura where he had thrived, though Chrestus might have advised leaving him to Roman mercy as Aaron kept a tight grip on the kingdom's finances. Which I was very grateful for.

Two clerks sat behind the governor and treasurer taking notes, which would be stored in the kingdom's archives for future generations to study.

'Thank you for attending,' I said. 'I know you are all busy.'

I had intended to tease information out of them regarding the position of the kingdom and the current state of the empire. But no sooner had we all sat at the table than the duty officer appeared and bowed to me.

'Apologies, majesty, but Byrd is outside requesting to be admitted.'

I beamed with delight.

'Show him in.'

He was younger but still dressed like a poor commoner in his black Agraci robes and *shemagh*, which he removed as he flopped down in a chair next to Chrestus. He had obviously ridden hard to get to Dura from Palmyra, though I noticed he did not have the limp that had put a stop to him being Dura's chief scout. Gallia poured him a cup of water, which he drank greedily.

'It is good to see you, Byrd,' I told him. 'How is Noora?'

'Good, lord.'

That was unchanged, at least.

'Gaius Antistus Vetus is threatening war,' he announced after draining the cup.

'Who?' I unwittingly said.

They all looked at me with astonishment.

'The governor of Syria,' Rsan informed me.

'And a personal friend of Julius Caesar,' added Aaron.

I resisted the temptation to ask who he was, though I had no knowledge of the name.

'And this is important because?' I asked casually.

But Byrd was not listening to me as he looked at my wife.

'I did warn you, Gallia. Encouraging the rulers of the Agraci to provoke the Romans in Syria and Judea would have consequences, and now those consequences threaten war against Palmyra.'

'The Romans know Palmyra has Dura's protection,' replied Gallia dismissively. 'And Dura has the backing of the entire Parthian Empire.'

'Would someone explain precisely what is happening?' I asked.

Byrd was in an unusually talkative mood.

'After Malik's death, Rasha and Spartacus took control of the Agraci and allowed Jewish rebels to use Palmyra as a base, from which they attack Romani soldiers and officials in Judea.'

'They are not rebels,' insisted Aaron, 'they are fighting for freedom.'

'And the Syrian assassins Rasha and Spartacus welcome to their tent? Are they freedom fighters?' asked Byrd, who turned back to Gallia. 'I ask you to intervene and demand that Rasha and Spartacus banish these troublesome elements from Palmyra before they spark a war.'

'You forget yourself, Byrd,' replied Gallia. 'You are the army's chief scout, not the queen's advisor.'

So Malik was dead, Spartacus and Rasha ruled the Agraci and Byrd was still my chief scout. I also sensed a slight hostility between him and Gallia, which did not bode well.

'And tell Praxima to also stop sending bandits to Palmyra to make war on Romani,' added Byrd.

'I will do no such thing,' Gallia told him. 'I do not tell the Queen of Mesene what to do.'

Chrestus was rapping his fingers on the tabletop as he pondered what Byrd had told us. I wanted to shout for joy that Praxima, and I assumed Nergal, were still ruling Mesene. However, I retained my composure. The army's commander looked at me.

'It might be prudent to bring the Immortals and the horsemen at Persepolis to Dura as a precaution.'

'Why are the Immortals at Persepolis?' I asked.

The Immortals was the name of the professional foot soldiers raised by Spartacus to protect the Kingdom of Gordyene. They were Roman legionaries in all but name, being equipped, trained and organised along Roman lines in a mirror image of my own legions. Yet such was the loathing Spartacus had for the Romans that he denied they were related to Rome's legions in any way. His antipathy towards Rome obviously transcended worlds, it seemed, though why were they in the Kingdom of Persis?

‘They are based there to save taxing the resources of Dura, majesty,’ Chrestus told me. ‘In any case, having been raised and trained in Persis, it made sense for them to be based there until they were needed elsewhere.’

‘Of course, of course,’ I replied. ‘My mind has gone blank. And what of the other forces of Dura’s based in Persis?’

Chrestus ran a hand over his shaved crown. ‘In addition to the Immortals, Satrap Godarz can send us two thousand cataphracts and twenty thousand horse archers.’

Satrap Godarz? It had a nice ring to it. But how did Godarz become satrap of a kingdom that had nothing to do with Dura? One more riddle that I needed to solve. But not at this juncture.

‘Bring them here,’ said Gallia, ‘along with Lucius Domitus. That will be more than enough to deter the Romans.’

‘This Caesar, how likely is he to intervene to support his friend?’ I asked Byrd.

‘He is looking for a reason to wage war on Parthia,’ my friend told me. ‘Both to expand Roman territory and recapture the eagles Surena took at Carrhae.’

‘Surena took the eagles at Carrhae?’ I inadvertently spat out.

They all stared at me with incredulity. They thought I had taken leave of my senses. I had to think quick.

‘That is why he was promoted to lord high general of the empire, majesty,’ Rsan told me, trying to be helpful.

‘I thought I was lord...’

I stopped myself from making another mistake. Clearly there was much to learn about this new Dura I found myself in.

‘And as lord high general, it will be Surena who will make the decision, together with Orodes, how to respond to the Roman governor of Syria, not you, Byrd,’ gloated Gallia.

I found this animosity between the pair disconcerting and not to my liking.

‘Be that as it may, majesty,’ said Chrestus. ‘We need to make a decision on the troops at Persepolis sooner rather than later.’

‘They remain where they are until I have had time to reflect more closely on the matter,’ I announced. ‘This meeting is over.’

I thanked the gods for the thoroughness of Rsan who had insisted every council meeting was recorded on papyrus, the records being stored in the archives for posterity. I immediately sought out the chief archivist and ordered him to bring me the minutes of the meetings over the preceding year. I asked Byrd if he wanted to stay in the palace but he informed me he would

lodge with Alcaeus before travelling back to Palmyra. It saddened me that he and Gallia did not embrace before he departed.

I sat in a stuffy room in the bowels of the Headquarters Building poring over sheets of papyrus, each one recording the minutiae of the administration required in the running of a kingdom. I had always believed the things we discussed in meetings concerned mighty and weighty matters concerning not only the Kingdom of Dura but also the Parthian Empire. But perusing the notes taken by the scribes revealed a different picture. Topics such as sewers, city markets, trade disputes, and law and order, were discussed far more than strategic and political matters. Nevertheless, three days of trawling through the archives provided me with the background information I needed to familiarise myself with the world I had been plunged into. Surena was the ruler of Gordyene and was indeed lord high general, a position awarded him after defeating the Romans at Carrhae. I myself had been injured at the earlier Battle of Hatra where an arrow had lodged itself in my leg. Surena lived in Vanadzor with his wife Viper and their three young children, which was a pleasant surprise. Another delightful discovery was that Axsen had not died in childbirth but still lived and ruled Babylon as well as being the wife of the king of kings. No mention was made of any more children aside from Phraates, who was to marry Claudia, a match that sent shivers down my spine.

I had apparently been gifted Persis as a temporary expedient to placate me on not being elected king of kings, a notion I found frankly ridiculous given my age-old quest to avoid sitting on the high throne at all costs. Nevertheless, Persis, the former kingdom of King Narses who had plunged Parthia into civil war and whose defeat had been won at great cost, was given to me until a suitable candidate could be found to rule it. I had sent Godarz, formerly governor of Dura, together with Lucius Domitus, formerly commander of Dura's army, to rule it and raise an army to guarantee the rule of King of Kings Orodes, and by all accounts the pair had made a damn good job of it. Two thousand cataphracts, twenty-five thousand horse archers and ten-thousand-foot soldiers, called Immortals, in honour of the élite Persian troops of old. As far as I could tell from what I read and the calculations I did in my head, I had arrived at this new Dura eight years after the Battle of Carrhae.

Each day I rode out with the Amazons just after dawn to train with my wife's bodyguard while the sun was still weak. Remus was back in his stall before the sun began to climb rapidly and temperatures soared. The legionary camp was still in existence, though the land to the south of the city was not as intensively farmed and irrigated as when I had sat down with Girra and accepted his offer. I wondered if Almas, the one-handed governor of a later Dura, had yet to join

the army's horse archers. I also reflected that Haya, Navid, Klietas, Yasmina and Azar did not yet exist. It was an odd thought.

I stood in front of the granite plaque in the Citadel, which had been erected to list the names of those Companions who had died so their memory would endure long after their demise. I was pleased to see the plaque was largely empty of names.

'Wondering where your name will be carved, majesty?'

I turned to see a man who I had not seen in an age, a scruffy, one-eyed rascal named Spandarar who had been the leader of Dura's lords when I had first arrived in the kingdom. Squat, barrel-chested, with arms as thick as tree trunks and hands the size of a bear's paws, he was a desert raider who had happily fought the Agraci before I had brokered a peace with the desert people.

'Spandarar, you old rogue. How are you?'

He scratched his nose. 'Ups and downs, majesty, ups and downs.'

'What brings you to the Citadel?'

He scuffed the ground with a boot.

'Ever toyed with a horned viper, majesty?'

What an odd question.

'Er, no, can't say I have.'

'They are bad-tempered reptiles, best left alone, and if you torment one, he will bite you, more than once.'

'I assume there is a point to this.'

He looked at me with his one eye. 'As you know, I have turned my hand to horse trading.'

'Trading or rustling?'

He looked genuinely hurt. 'Those days are gone, majesty. Mostly. Anyway, I do a fair amount of trade with Syria and I have to tell you the mood in the Roman province is turning sour. The governor won't put up with his officials and merchants being killed much longer. Word is, troops are gathering in Damascus for a campaign against Palmyra. Just thought you should know.'

'I appreciate you telling me, Spandarar.'

'And perhaps you might like to mention it to the queen as well. Everyone knows she hates the Romans, but she will get those two hyenas who rule Palmyra killed unless she reins them in.'

'You think it is that serious?'

He spat on the ground and rubbed the heel of his boot in the phlegm.

‘I have no love for the Agraci, but it was a black day when Malik died. He was a calming influence and saw a vision of a Palmyra thriving between the Roman and Parthian worlds. Now that is all gone.’

‘I will endeavour to appeal to the queen’s reason, Spandarat.’

He said nothing but I could see in his eye he believed it would be a waste of time.

‘The caravans can always go through Hatra instead of Dura, majesty.’

He and everyone else knew Dura’s wealth was derived from the Silk Road, which was actually not one road, but a series of routes, from China, through Parthia and on to Roman Syria, Judea and Egypt. The wealthy and privileged of Rome and Egypt had an insatiable desire for silk, as did the nobles of Parthia, which meant money flowed into the coffers of those Parthian kingdoms the Silk Road ran through, which included Dura. The Romans believed that the caravans that arrived in their provinces had originally set out from China, but in fact caravans stopped at oases or cities and passed their loads from trader to trader. These traders took a percentage of the profits from the goods being transported, which meant the price of silk and other commodities increased with every transaction along the length of the Silk Road.

Every Parthian king of kings had explored the possibility of establishing his own silk farms but the Chinese guarded the production of the expensive material jealously, the emperor having a large security network to ensure no silkworms left China. Silk itself was three thousand years old, being invented by Lady His-Ling-Shih, the wife of the Yellow Emperor, who subsequently became known as the Goddess of Silk. The material itself came from silk moths that lay eggs, from which silkworms emerge. The silkworms surround themselves with cocoons that resemble furry balls, and from these balls comes silk thread, which is woven into cloth. A single cocoon could yield a mile of silk thread.

The Silk Road had made Dura rich and Spandarat had no need to tell me about the perils of endangering the river of money that flowed through the city. However, when I casually mentioned the topic to Gallia I received an icy response. We made love daily, which she found delightful and intriguing, whereas for myself I could not satisfy my thirst for this ‘new’ Gallia. And after one particularly enjoyable romantic encounter, I mentioned to her the need to rein in the rulers of Palmyra. She went from sultry soft clay in my hands to cold granite in an instant.

‘You are familiar with what this Julius Caesar has done to my people?’

I was not and racked my brains for knowledge about the man who led the Roman world. There was none. I remained silent.

‘Sometimes your ignorance is astounding, Pacorus. Allow me to refresh your memory.’

‘Please do,’ I smiled.

She was not smiling.

‘When I came to Parthia after escaping Italy with you and the other Companions, I paid for information concerning what was happening in Rome, and specifically the tribes in Gaul. Even though I am a Parthian queen, part of me will always be a Gaul.’

‘I know this.’

‘Julius Caesar is a butcher,’ she spat. ‘He spent four years waging a war of annihilation against the Gauls, my people, even selling one entire tribe, the Aduatuci, into slavery. Tens of thousands of Gauls were killed and thousands more were sold into slavery. When Parthians were defeating Crassus at Carrhae, the Romans were turning Gaul into a Roman province. How would you feel if Parthia disappeared under the Roman heel?’

‘I would feel angry and vengeful,’ I admitted.

She was not listening. Her mind was elsewhere as she carried on the tale I had not heard before.

‘Many Gauls refused to live under tyranny and rose in revolt. They were led by a man called Vercingetorix but he was a leader cast in the same mould as Spartacus and the Gauls were defeated and subjugated a second time.’

‘We are a long way from Gaul, Gallia. If you start a war with the Romans, the silk trade will suffer, and so will Dura.’

‘The Romans desire to control the entire Silk Road, Pacorus, which means they covet all Parthia. In your heart you know this.’

She was right. Ever since my first encounter with the Romans I had known they were possessed of an insatiable desire to conquer foreign lands and peoples. But Parthia had defeated Rome at Carrhae, which would make any Roman leader think twice before starting a war against the empire. But Roman pride could not ignore continual provocations by the rulers of Palmyra.

‘Parthia is not Gaul, my love. Rome lacks the resources to conquer the Parthian Empire, though capturing Palmyra would be relatively easy. All I am asking is that you use whatever influence you have with Spartacus and Rasha to urge them not to allow Palmyra to continue to be used as a base from which rebels can attack Syria and Judea. And tell them Parthia will not defend Palmyra if they provoke the Romans into declaring war.’

She gave me a half-smile but I doubted my words would be heeded. Gallia hated the Romans, Praxima hated the Romans and so did Spartacus, whose father had been killed by the Romans. But I comforted myself with the knowledge that amidst the friction, all sides had an investment in ensuring trade, which had benefitted Agraci, Romans and Parthians alike, was not interrupted.

With Gallia increasingly focused on the forthcoming wedding between Claudia and Prince Phraates, Palmyra's troubles faded, for which I was pleased. Claudia herself was the carefree young woman I remembered before she joined the ranks of the Scythian Sisters. The austere, forbidding Claudia who became the advisor to King of Kings Phraates was far away from the attractive woman with thick light-brown hair and high cheekbones who was thrilled by the prospect of marriage to the son of Orodes. Isabella, my second daughter, was only fourteen and also dreamed of marrying a prince so she would one day become a queen. Little did she know that her wish would be granted but it would take her to the other side of the empire. Or perhaps her fate would be different in this existence. It was all very strange and slightly unnerving, while at the same time being wonderful and exhilarating.

I visited the legionary camp where the golden griffin and silver eagle resided, though in a well-guarded tent as opposed to the mud-brick building of later years. Alcaeus still headed the army's medical corps and a sharp-tongued, younger Scelias ran the Sons of the Citadel scheme. Arsam, Dura's chief armourer, was not the aged and creaking individual who had retired from his position after a lifetime's service to Dura. Rather, he was a muscular individual with hair! I went to see him in the spacious walled enclosure where he and his armourers created the weapons and armour that equipped Dura's soldiers. The workshops were always filled with sound, noxious smells and the heat of furnaces as metals were cast, moulded and hammered on anvils. Men with thick arms and scarred forearms worked with hammers, chisels, prongs and drills to fashion armour and weapons.

Arsam was a man of few words who viewed the armouries as very much his own kingdom and discouraged visitors. He was civil and always ensured the weekly report on weapon and ammunition stocks, repairs and production was submitted on time. But he had little time for small talk, even with his king. I asked him if everything was fine and he nodded. Did he need anything? No. I got the distinct impression I was in the way, so I thanked him for his diligence and went to amble away from the large mud-brick workshop with a high roof and open skylights to allow heat to escape. A figure with white hair was hammering a piece of metal on an anvil. I looked around to see if anyone had noticed the pale-skinned individual working among them, but everyone was going about their work and ignoring him. I walked over to him. He was flattening a piece of red-hot steel with a hammer, his blows expertly placed to shape the metal into a *gladius* blade. But then I would expect nothing less from Girra, patron of metallurgists.

'How do you like your gift?' he asked me, the metal transforming into the shape of a *gladius* before my eyes.

'I am very grateful, divinity, and humbled.'

'You will need to be bold, not humble, to face the trials that will come.'

'What trials?' I asked, the workshop suddenly feeling cooler.

'The trial of adversity, King Pacorus, and whether it will forge a new king of Dura.'