

Chapter 1

The atmosphere in the throne room was oppressive, beads of sweat appearing on the foreheads of those I was circling in a menacing fashion. Or at least I was attempting to be threatening as I limped up and down in front of the four individuals drawn up in a line, saying nothing at first to increase the tension. I was probably fooling myself and the truth was my leg was aching like fury, which made me wince, thus spoiling the façade of intimidation. Nevertheless, I was far from happy and wanted answers, though the one who could provide them was not present. Not yet.

I walked slowly behind the four, all much younger and fitter than me, though all nervous in the presence of an angry King of Dura. I took a few more paces to stand before them, folding my arms across my chest prior to speaking, the overall effect being ruined as a sharp pain shot through my leg, which felt as though a red-hot branding iron had been pressed into the flesh. I grimaced in pain.

‘Are you hurt, highborn?’ asked Klietas, concern etched on his face.

‘Silence!’ I shouted. ‘You will speak when spoken to.’

It was warm in the throne room, the morning dry and hot, the doors to the chamber having been shut and the guards instructed to leave so I could be alone with the transgressors, though I was feeling more breathless and tired than they. I walked back to my throne, though hobbled would be a more accurate description, lowering myself slowly on to the wooden seat. My leg continued to throb, and I cursed the archer that had put an arrow into my limb all those years ago.

I stared at each of the accused in turn. Talib, the Agraci leader of the army’s scouts stood next to his wife Minu, the deputy commander of the Amazons, whose name meant ‘paradise’ in Persian but who was an accomplished killer, her lithe frame and full lips belying her deadly skills. Next to her stood another Amazon, Haya, taller, her hair slightly lighter and her heart-shaped face giving her a most charming appearance. But my eyes were drawn to the small scar on her neck, the result of an arrow wound at Irbil, which had killed her. Yet here she was. Hale and hearty. The last member of the group was my squire Klietas – the scrawny, threadbare orphan from Media who had returned with me from Irbil to be trained to eventually become a cataphract, though he had of late been absent from the palace. I continued to stare at the scar on Haya’s neck. I wondered if she knew she was a walking miracle? Probably not. I decided to break the silence.

‘Imagine my surprise when a former Roman slave, a man who worked in the kitchens of a villa in Zeugma, presented himself to me outside the Citadel yesterday morning, throwing

himself to the ground in front of my horse and thanking me for releasing him and his family from a life of bondage.’

Klietas, innocent that he was, smiled in recognition of his achievement. The other three stood like statues, unblinking.

‘General Chrestus riding beside me nearly killed the man on the spot, fearing it was an assassination attempt. Either that or due to his extreme annoyance at nearly being thrown from his horse. But I was intrigued and after I had calmed the general down, I got talking with the cook, who told me an interesting tale. Of how he and the other slaves in the household of a rich, fat Parthian and his wife had all been freed by four individuals, two men, one young, one older, and two women, again one older than the other, who had all entered the villa as slaves.’

I nodded when I saw furtive glances between Talib and Minu.

‘I will not ask you to betray your mistress, for after speaking with the cook some more I learned he was the property of a man named Cookes and his wife Hanita. He was so grateful for him and his family being freed that he and they walked all the way to Dura from Hatran territory, though he informed me he and the other freed slaves had all been given money to start new lives. But he wanted to thank the King of Dura personally for sending his servants to Zeugma to free him.

‘You can imagine my astonishment at this declaration, having had no knowledge of any mission to Zeugma.’

At that moment the doors to the chamber were opened by the guards outside and in swept Gallia, nostrils flaring, and eyes narrowed to slits, her face a mask of steely determination. I sat back and smiled as she marched to the dais, turning to look at her co-conspirators.

‘You may all leave,’ she barked.

Talib gave Minu a sideways smile, Haya looked relieved and Klietas was grinning like a mischievous teenager, which, despite his now sinewy, toned frame, he was. Caught between their queen and king and unsure what to do, I flicked my hand to indicate they all should leave. They did so, in haste.

‘Close the doors behind you,’ I called after them, Talib, bowing his head as he did so.

Gallia drew herself up in front of me, eyeing me icily before speaking.

‘I hope you have not meted out any punishments to my loyal servants.’

‘*Your* servants? I thought I was king at Dura. As to punishing them, in view of the fact they were acting under your orders, they are blameless of any infractions, though I do not endorse using this kingdom’s soldiers as assassins.’

She touched her necklace, from which hung a lock of Rasha's hair. She pulled out the lock from under her tunic and examined it.

'You remember Rasha, Pacorus? The child we first met in this palace over forty years ago? Perhaps you have forgotten her already.'

The chamber was hot and airless, my leg was aflame, and I was in no mood for my wife's sarcasm. I rose from my seat.

'How dare you! I loved Rasha as much as you did. But I have not sunk so low as to use her death as an excuse to send assassins to indulge your base instincts.'

'You have gone soft, Pacorus,' she sneered.

'Soft!' I raged. 'I will not have the Kingdom of Dura become an abode of murderers, and I tell you this now, if I find out about any other Amazons carrying out assassinations in foreign kingdoms, they will be banished from Dura.'

'That is not your decision to make,' she replied with Gallia fury. 'The Amazons answer to me and me alone.'

'Not when they bring the Kingdom of Dura into disrepute.'

She threw back her head and laughed mockingly.

'The only thing the world respects, Pacorus, is strength. If Dura's enemies know they are always in danger, that they can never rest easy, then they will think twice before instigating wars against us.'

She pointed at me accusingly. 'You made a mistake allowing Atrax and his sisters to leave Irbil and the result was a fresh invasion of Parthia and the death of Rasha. It pains me to say so...'

'But you are going to do so anyway,' I interrupted.

She suddenly changed her demeanour, took her seat beside me and laid a hand on my arm.

'You are an honourable man, Pacorus, but we must deal with the world as we find it, not as we want it to be. Do you really lament the death of that fat traitor Cookes?'

'No, but I object to being treated like a fool. You told me it would be good for his education if Klietas accompanied Talib and Minu to Palmyra, but instead I discover he was part of a mission to Zeugma to assassinate Cookes and his wife.'

She removed her hand.

'Klietas did go to Palmyra, and then on to Syria and Zeugma.'

'The point is I should have been told of your plan beforehand, not kept in the dark to learn of it from a freed Roman slave.'

'Ah, so you are angry because your pride has been hurt.'

'I am angry because members of Dura's army are being sent on secret missions without my permission,' I shot back, 'and for your information, the Amazons are not your private army but are under my command.'

'They are not,' she hissed, putting the emphasis on the last word.

I decided to try another tactic. 'All our actions have repercussions, Gallia. Cast your mind back to when Cleopatra sent assassins to Dura to kill Kewab.'

'They were caught and executed.'

I smiled. 'Exactly, and that might be the fate of your Amazons if you continue to use them as assassins.'

'Menkhaf and his band of Egyptians were caught because they were careless,' she said. 'They did not prepare for their task thoroughly and paid the price.'

'Which brings me neatly to 'The Sanctuary.'

Her eyes narrowed once more.

'What about it?'

The brothel where Roxanne and Peroz had first met all those years ago had fallen into disrepair and was brought to the verge of bankruptcy following the death of the fearsome Samhat, the madam who became head of Dura's guild of prostitutes. When it closed its cracked doors for the last time, Gallia purchased the premises and paid off the not inconsiderable debts the whorehouse had incurred. She then set about having it renovated, after which it became a residence exclusive to the Amazons.

'The clue is in the name, Pacorus,' she elucidated further. 'It is a place where the Amazons can relax in an all-female environment, free from the prying eyes of men.'

'I have heard otherwise. That it is a place where poisoners impart their wisdom and other dark arts are practised.'

'Street gossip,' she sneered.

'Do you deny it?'

'I am not on trial,' she responded indignantly. 'I would have thought you had more pressing things to attend to rather than pestering me about inconsequential matters.'

'What more pressing things?'

'Parthia's enemies are still at large and no doubt plotting to return to the empire to wreak more mischief.'

'What enemies?'

'Has age dimmed your memory, Pacorus? Have you forgotten Atrax, Titus Tullus, Laodice and Tiridates so quickly?'

‘Of course not,’ I snapped at her. ‘But as they are not *in* the empire there is little I can do about them.’

I saw a glint in her blue eyes.

‘No one is out of reach.’

‘No! I will hear no more of assassination. Henceforth, you are forbidden to send any Amazons on clandestine murder missions, and neither my scouts nor my squire are at your disposal.’

I stood and stormed from the throne room, though limped in a rapid fashion would be a more accurate description. How I wanted to taste again the magical elixir that had restored our physiques during the time of trial at Irbil. That said, now I had officially retired from military campaigning, my daily exertions had been reduced considerably. Gallia still thirsted for revenge against those who had wronged Dura, or rather her, but I had had my fill of bloodshed. And by all accounts so had the enemies of Parthia.

It had been twenty-seven years since I had fought Marcus Licinius Crassus at Carrhae and in the years afterwards I never dreamed that there would be a lasting peace between Rome and Parthia. And yet the Euphrates, once watched and guarded closely by Hatra and Dura, both kingdoms forming the western shield of the empire against Roman aggression, had become nothing more than the waterway that delineated the boundary between Parthia and Rome. The bitterness that existed between Rome and Ctesiphon had dissipated to such an extent that negotiations regarding the return of the eagles captured at Carrhae and Lake Urmia had formally commenced, Phraates and Octavian corresponding with each other on a regular basis regarding their repatriation to Rome and reuniting the young son of Phraates with his father. By all accounts, Octavian himself, who ensured the son of the high king enjoyed a privileged life, doted on the baby that had been captured by Tiridates and taken to Syria, thence to Rome. I wondered if the young Phraates would wish to return to a land he had never known after being ‘Romanised’? But that was a matter to be resolved later. Having fought Romans on and off for forty years, I was delighted the legions no longer cast a long shadow over Parthia.

There was also peace in the east.

While Gallia and I had been fighting for our lives at Irbil, King Ali of Atropaiene, Lord High General and the commander of a great army that had been mustered in the west of the empire to assist the kingdoms of the east in their fight against the Kushans, had brought the Kushan emperor Kujula to heel. After defeating one of his generals near the Indus, Ali, ably assisted by Satrap Kewab, had laid waste to large swathes of Kushan territory. Faced by the Parthian threat and the outbreak of war with the Satavahana Empire to the south, Kujula had

agreed a perpetual peace with the Parthian Empire, formally recognising the Indus River as the boundary between the two empires. Ali was returning to his home in triumph, as were the horsemen of Dura.

The horse archers and cataphracts had been away for eighteen months and when they returned the Durans, Exiles and whole city turned out to welcome them back. Azad and Sporaces had sent casualty lists ahead before their arrival and though our losses had been mercifully light, there were still women made widows who had to be cared for out of treasury funds, in addition to the children of the fallen that Dura would have to provide for. The route from the pontoon bridges to the Palmyrene Gate and on to the Citadel was lined with the Durans and Exiles, behind them cheering crowds throwing flowers and applauding the returning heroes. Cataphracts sweltered in full-scale armour, their heads covered in full-face helmets as they trotted into the city and back to their barracks, Sporaces and his horse archers doing likewise. Azad, Sporaces and their senior officers rode on to the Citadel where their king and queen waited to greet them, being joined by the uncouth and bad-tempered commander of the ammunition train, Farid.

A colour party of Durans and Exiles stood to attention in the courtyard when they rode through the gates, trumpeters playing a fanfare, Chrestus saluting the horsemen and the colour party presenting the golden griffin and silver lion standards. Opposite them, Zenobia and a detachment of Amazons drew their swords and raised them in salute, their commander lowering the griffin banner as they did so.

Stable hands came forward when the salutes had ended to take the new arrivals' horses, Azad tossing his helmet to a servant and handing his *kontos* to another as he marched up the steps to bow to me and Gallia. Alcaeus stood between us, which the commander of my cataphracts noticed. Our Greek friend had tried to act as mediator between husband and wife to affect a reconciliation, to no avail. I was still annoyed at her and she was livid with me, a situation that showed no sign of changing.

'Welcome, welcome,' I gushed, 'and you, too, Sporaces.'

They were both tall, but Azad had a powerful frame whereas Sporaces was spindly and far slimmer in comparison, accentuated by the scale, leg and arm armour worn by Azad. Horse archers rode agile horses and tended to replicate their mounts, whereas cataphracts were big, strong men riding sturdy horses.

'It's good to be back,' grinned Azad, his square face beaded with sweat.

'The air in Dura is sweeter than in the east,' said Sporaces.

‘Can’t argue with that,’ agreed Azad, who had made the journey to the eastern edges of the empire twice, ‘though the Kushan lands offer rich pickings.’

‘When you have both changed and rested,’ I said, ‘I want to hear all about your great adventure. How are you, Farid?’

His robes covered in dust, his hair and beard wild affairs, how Sporaces and indeed Chrestus would have liked to submit him to military law. But Farid was a civilian, as were the men who rode and maintained the fifteen hundred camels that made up Dura’s ammunition train. Farid himself had been a camel driver at the Battle of Carrhae and knew all there was to know about camels and how to manage them on the battlefield. He also had a keen eye when it came to recruiting camel drivers who would not panic on the battlefield. He loved his camels and attended to their needs most diligently, but he was like the beasts he spent his life around: gruff, obstinate and bad-tempered.

He gave a nod of the head. ‘Eighteen months spent surrounded by horse and camel shit and eating dust produced by over one hundred thousand horses and camels, how do you think I am?’

Rsan and Aaron standing behind us gasped in astonishment and Alcaeus allowed himself a wry smile.

Farid sniffed. ‘Meant no offence, majesty.’

‘If you were in the army I would sentence you to a hundred lashes,’ seethed Sporaces.

Farid winked at me. ‘Good job I ain’t, isn’t it? You never ran out of arrows, though, did you? Not like those useless eastern goatherds who went on campaign without any ammunition. I was saying to my men...’

‘Thank you, Farid,’ Chrestus interrupted him, ‘I’m sure the king does not want to be bored by your idle gossip.’

‘I will hear all your stories,’ I assured them, ‘for you have all covered yourselves in glory and increased the prestige of Dura immeasurably.’

Alcaeus laughed, and Gallia rolled her eyes, but both Rsan and Aaron nodded in agreement. The latter had been delighted to see Dura’s professional horsemen depart for the east, not because he disliked Azad or Sporaces, but rather because the upkeep of the men they led had been borne by the eastern kingdoms for the duration of the campaign rather than Dura.

Our returning heroes were feasted in the banqueting hall that night, the chamber reverberating to the babble of raised voices as men who had been on campaign for months finally relaxed and enjoyed the lavish occasion laid on for them. Many drank too much and got

drunk, though both Sporaces and Azad, invited to sit at the top table with their king, queen and General Chrestus, imbibed only in moderation.

‘We heard about what happened at Irbil, majesty,’ Azad told me, tearing at the rack of ribs on the platter before him.

‘Heard from whom?’ asked Gallia, sipping at her wine.

‘General Hovik, majesty, just before he and the horsemen from Gordyene departed for their homeland, on the express orders of King Spartacus.’

‘Did that affect the campaign?’ I queried.

Sporaces, finishing off a chicken kebab, shook his head.

‘No, majesty, by the time the message reached the army we were on our way back to Parthian territory.’

‘General Herneus was also instructed to make his way back to Hatra,’ added Azad.

‘Due to the scheming of Phraates, we and the army’s legions nearly met with disaster at a place called the Gird-I Dasht,’ said Gallia bitterly, finishing her wine and holding out her cup for it to be refilled. ‘It is just as well you are back because Dura has unfinished business to attend to.’

Chrestus, Azad and Sporaces exchanged glances but none spoke.

‘How is Kewab faring?’ I asked, eager to change the topic.

‘He has been the bulwark preventing the Kushans from breaking into the empire,’ reported Azad, ‘and hopefully now Kujula has agreed a fresh truce, he can enjoy a period of rest.’

‘Without him, King Ali would not have achieved what he did,’ added Sporaces.

I beamed with delight. I was immensely proud of Kewab’s progress, and his achievements both at Dura and in the east had earmarked him out for greatness.

‘I am hopeful he will make the transition from satrap to king very soon,’ I said. ‘Aria needs a ruler.’

Azad nodded. ‘He could not do any worse than Tiridates. Is he still in Syria, majesty?’

‘He is indeed,’ said Gallia, ‘where he continues to plot against Parthia. While he still lives, there will be no peace with Rome.’

‘There will be no war with Rome,’ I said, ‘Octavian and Phraates are in advanced negotiations regarding agreeing a lasting peace between Parthia and Rome.’

Gallia took another sip of wine. ‘And we all know how trustworthy those two are. The king forgets that we, having been abandoned by Phraates, were recently fighting for our lives in Irbil, against an army financed by Octavian.’

All three commanders stared into their drinking vessels, squirming with embarrassment as their king and queen argued.

‘There will be no war between Rome and Parthia,’ I said again, ‘regardless of what Tiridates may or may not want.’

‘That remains to be seen,’ she sneered.

Both of us sunk into sullen silences and the atmosphere on the top table became noticeably cooler as the evening progressed. All three commanders made their excuses and left the event early, the hall still filled with raucous chatter and laughter as they sloped off. Alcaeus, who followed soon after, stopped off at our table to berate us both. His beard and wiry hair were now heavily streaked with grey, but his mind was as keen as ever.

‘I see you have both managed to make this evening about yourselves rather than our returning soldiers.’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ I replied innocently.

He looked down his nose at me.

‘Heard of Socrates, Pacorus?’

‘No.’

‘And you, Gallia?’

She shrugged. ‘Is he a Greek?’

He raised his eyes to the roof.

‘He was one of history’s great thinkers, not that I expect such individuals to be recognised in Dura. But you two remind me of one of his sayings. That children have bad manners, contempt for authority, show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in place of exercise.’

‘Whatever the cause of the discord between you, try to remember you are king and queen as opposed to an old, bickering couple living in a less salubrious part of the city. As such, you have a responsibility to act in a dignified manner and be an example to others.’

He departed before either of us had a chance to reply, though Gallia was bristling at his brusque manner, mumbling something under her breath that I could not discern. But his words were wasted on her because that night I was banished to a guest bedroom in the palace until I agreed not to interfere with the activities of the Amazons.

She was all smiles and affection, none directed at me, when Alcaeus took his leave to embark on his trip to Athens a few days later. Byrd had arranged for him to join a caravan journeying to Palmyra and on to Syria for the first part of his tour, after which a ship would take him first to Cyprus and then on to Greece.

Our friend, Companion and former head of the army’s medical corps stood at the foot of the palace steps, around him his friends and colleagues to bid him farewell. Rsan, his closest

friend, was most unhappy he was leaving Dura while Scelias, a fellow Greek and head of the Sons of the Citadel, was giving him advice on what to do when he arrived in Athens.

‘Avoid at all costs the Sceptics, my friend; they are an abomination. Any school of thought that believes true knowledge is unobtainable deserves to be closed down and its tutors banished.’

Alcaeus laughed. ‘I will do my best to avoid them.’

There were tears in Gallia’s eyes when she embraced her old friend.

‘You should have an escort, let me organise a party of Amazons, or a company of horse archers.’

‘A company?’ he exclaimed. ‘A hundred armed men, now that would arouse suspicion.’

She gripped his arms. ‘Greece is occupied by the Romans and you are still a wanted man. If they learn the physician of Spartacus is in Athens, they will seize you and take you back to Rome.’

Scelias frowned. ‘Majesty, the Servile War ended forty-five years ago. It is highly unlikely Alcaeus would be in any danger. Besides, knowing the Roman appetite for rewriting history and nostalgia, if they learned he was in Athens they would probably lay on a banquet for him. They might even invite him to Rome itself, so he could entertain Octavian with stories about Spartacus, his flight to Parthia and subsequent service in the army of King Pacorus.’

‘I could organise an escort if Alcaeus desires it,’ confirmed Chrestus.

‘Excellent idea,’ agreed Rsan.

Alcaeus held up his hands. ‘All I desire is to be left in peace, so I can begin my journey. As for the Romans, if they wish to punish an old man then so be it, but either way I am determined to see Athens again before I die. And now, if you will all excuse me, a caravan is waiting for me.’

Klietas placed a footstool beside the horse I had gifted Alcaeus, enabling him to gain the saddle more easily. Before he did so I embraced him.

‘Just make sure you return,’ I told him.

‘And you heal your rift with Gallia. At our age life is too short to waste on petty bickering.’

‘I will do as you say, my old friend.’

None of us wanted him to go, not because we suspected Roman subterfuge but rather we desired him to remain at Dura to live out the rest of his life in peace. It was entirely selfish and in truth he was still sprightly for his age as opposed to being an invalid. But the thought of him wandering around the eastern Mediterranean alone filled me with trepidation, though for Alcaeus the prospect of the trip had given him a new lease of life.

The departure of Alcaeus signalled the beginning of many changes in the running of the kingdom, which became apparent when Aaron and Rsan first brought their deputies to a weekly council meeting.

They were not strangers because I had seen them around the Citadel many times, though the meeting was the first time they were formally inducted into the small group that directed the affairs of the kingdom. Both Rsan and Aaron still had many years left in them, or at least I hoped they did, but like all of us they were not getting any younger and to ensure the kingdom continued to run as efficiently as possible, both recognised the need for their deputies to step up to assume more responsibilities, and Alcaeus' replacement also attended.

The styluses of the two clerks worked feverishly as I rose and addressed those present.

'I would like to officially welcome three new members of the council who will be attending meetings from now on.'

I smiled at the short, dark-haired individual seated next to Aaron.

'Welcome Ira.'

For years he had worked in the Treasury before becoming Aaron's deputy. He rose and bowed his head.

'Thank you, majesty.'

His grey-green eyes briefly scanned all those present before retaking his seat. He had sharp features and unlike many Jewish males had a small, pointed beard. His skin was also quite pale; a result of his aversion to the sun, or so Aaron had informed me. Of the newcomers, he was the stranger as the other two were well known to the others present. I turned to the elder of the three, a man with a stump where his left hand should have been.

'Welcome, Almas, former dragon commander of horse archers and veteran of many years' service in Dura's army.'

Chrestus, Azad and Sporaces, the latter two invited following their return from the east, rapped their knuckles on the table in acknowledgement of a fellow soldier.

Almas, whose name meant 'diamond' in Persian, rose and bowed his head to me, blushing slightly at the applause.

'Thank you, majesty, I hope to serve Dura as diligently sitting behind a desk as I did when in the saddle.'

'Try not to lose the other hand in the process,' said Chrestus.

Almas had lost his hand during the Battle of the Araxes when we had tried to prevent Mark Antony from leaving Parthia after his failure at Phraaspa. Alcaeus and his medics had saved his life, but the wound had ended his army career. Some men would have buckled under

such a calamity, turning to drink or even contemplating suicide. But Almas instead turned his mind to commerce; using the knowledge he had gleaned during his years with the army, chiefly talking to Dura's desert lords and Malik's Agraci warlords about the vast desert that surrounded Dura and Palmyra. Many had thought his wits had deserted him when he used his severance pension from the army to purchase an area of land in the desert some fifty miles south of the city of Dura and thirty miles west of the Euphrates, a stretch of land significant only for its barrenness and population of snakes and scorpions. But the area was also rich in a mineral that when ground down and mixed with olive oil, became antimony eye makeup. In a short space of time, Almas became extremely rich and purchased a mansion in the city. By chance it happened to be next to the home of Rsan and the two struck up an unlikely friendship, leading to Almas taking a keen interest in civil affairs, eventually leading to a seat on the city council.

The last new member was also well known to the soldiers at the table, having been a member of the army's medical corps for many years. Like Alcaeus, Sophus was one of Dura's Greek citizens, though unlike most of them he had blue eyes like my wife's. They studied him closely as I spoke.

'Last but not least, welcome Sophus, who has replaced Alcaeus as commander of the army's medical corps.'

'No one can replace Alcaeus,' said Gallia sternly, staring unblinking at the Greek.

Sophus, whose name meant 'clever' in his native language, rose and bowed his head to the queen.

'And I would never attempt to fill the boots of the man who is a legend in Dura and beyond. I consider my role to be more of a mission to keep his legacy alive and continue his work.'

That pleased Gallia for she flashed him a beautiful smile.

'Then you are most welcome among us, young Sophus.'

He was not really young, being in his mid-thirties, or thereabouts, but Gallia and I were now in our early sixties and so most people appeared young to us. It was all very demoralising.

'Perhaps we may commence the meeting, majesty,' said Rsan, studying a papyrus sheet before him.

Almas pointed to it and Rsan nodded.

'Please proceed,' I instructed.

The shutters to the room were open but the spring morning was overcast and mild and so the temperature in the room was pleasant enough. Though it dropped markedly when Rsan began speaking.

‘Yesterday, I received word from the chief of court at Ctesiphon enquiring if the King and Queen of Dura had received the several messages sent to them by King of Kings Phraates over the past few weeks.’

‘Write back and inform Phraates’ sycophant the King and Queen of Dura have no time for men who abandon those who saved his neck,’ sneered Gallia.

Chrestus laughed and banged the table, Azad and Sporaces slapping him on the back, but Rsan was appalled.

‘I would never use such intemperate language when addressing the high king of the empire, majesty.’

‘And we would not expect you to, Rsan,’ I said, ‘but at this present juncture we have nothing to say to the high king, not until he apologises for inciting an invasion of the empire he is supposed to protect, anyway.’

‘I must send some sort of reply, majesty,’ pleaded Rsan.

I looked at Gallia expectantly, waiting for a witty retort, but she merely stared out of the window.

‘Inform the chief of court, Dura’s king and queen are still recovering from their trial at Irbil,’ I told him, ‘and subsequent near-death experience at the Battle of Diyana, where they faced a combined army of Parthian rebels and Armenians.’

The clerks were recording every word but worry lines appeared on Rsan’s forehead.

‘I had no idea you were wounded, majesty. Have you seen a physician?’

‘Alcaeus did not mention you were injured, majesty,’ said Sophus. ‘I have to say you do not look ill.’

‘That is because I am not,’ I assured him, ‘but Ctesiphon’s chief of court does not know that. You understand, Rsan?’

‘I am not in favour of deceiving the high king’s officials, majesty...’

‘Just send the letter,’ snapped Gallia, ‘and let’s have no more talk of Phraates and his wretched courtiers.’

There was an uncomfortable silence before my wife turned her ire on Klietas who was filling cups with water, my squire-cum-part-time assassin staring wide-eyed at the queen.

‘Refill my cup,’ she ordered.

Klietas snapped out of his daze. ‘Yes, highborn.’

Gallia gave him an evil leer.

‘And remember, Klietas, it is death to speak of what goes on in council meetings. You remember the street of crosses at Irbil?’

He gulped. 'Yes, highborn.'

'Then you know what your fate will be if you betray the king's confidence. Now put the jug on the table and leave us.'

He did so hurriedly, bowing deeply to her and then me before shutting the door behind him.

'What is next on the agenda?' I asked, shaking my head at Gallia.

'Centurion Bullus has refused his promotion,' announced Chrestus.

I was determined to promote the hero of Irbil after our return to Dura, but it appeared he did not want any extra responsibility.

'He says he cannot rise any higher than a centurion,' grinned Chrestus, 'because he can't count higher than a hundred.'

Ira stopped perusing a ledger sheet and looked up at the general.

'If he does not have a command of numeracy, how is it he is a centurion, general, for surely the army has certain standards when it comes to holding positions of command?'

The veins on Chrestus' thick neck began to bulge.

'It was a joke, book-keeper.'

'Not a very funny one,' retorted Ira.

'That is a shame about Centurion Bullus,' I said quickly before Chrestus' short-temper manifested itself. 'What are those notes before you, Ira?'

Aaron's deputy looked at his master who nodded. Ira held up the sheet.

'An inventory, majesty, a projection of this year's crop yield.'

Chrestus sighed and the eyes of Azad and Sporaces glazed over, but Ira was undeterred.

'God willing, when the crops are gathered in the kingdom will have a great surplus of flour, dates, honey, flax, olives and wine.'

I was surprised by the latter commodity. 'Wine?'

Ira looked surprised. 'Have you not visited the vineyards to the south of the city, majesty?'

I had not. 'I rarely get a chance to journey the length and breadth of the kingdom, I regret to say.'

'That is a pity, majesty,' said Ira. 'The southern lands have been expanded greatly and there are now dozens of medium- and large-sized farms extending south from the city for a distance of two hundred and fifty miles, all watered by a complex system of irrigation systems financed by the city treasury, which means we benefit from taxes paid to the treasury by those farms benefiting from said systems.'

'*We?*' queried Gallia.

‘Meaning the city treasury, majesty,’ smiled Ira.

‘Ira has a plan to increase revenues substantially, majesty,’ Aaron informed me.

‘We would like to hear it,’ I said, Chrestus sighing again.

‘Media had traditionally exported commodities to surrounding kingdoms,’ reported Ira, ‘especially Mesene, Atropaiene, Babylon and Susiana, though its goods have also found their way to Persis further south. However, the recent invasions of Media have had a detrimental effect on the kingdom’s agricultural output, resulting in exports falling drastically.’

‘And so, Dura will step in to fill the gap,’ said Chrestus.

Ira nodded. ‘As it is currently a sellers’ market, our exports will be priced with a thirty percent mark-up across the board.’

‘More revenue means more money for the army,’ added Aaron.

‘At the expense of Mesene, Atropaiene, Babylon and Susiana,’ I said.

Ira shrugged. ‘Market conditions are what they are, majesty. It would be foolish not to take advantage of the happy position Dura finds itself in.’

Gallia was unhappy, or rather unhappier than when she had entered the room.

‘We should not take advantage of our allies.’

She was thinking of Atropaiene and Mesene, the latter formerly ruled by Nergal and Praxima, Nergal always a loyal supporter of Dura and Hatra.

‘I agree with the queen,’ I said, ‘export produce to foreign kingdoms by all means, Aaron, but only increase the price for goods going to Babylon and Susiana. They can afford it.’

It was perhaps churlish, but those kingdoms were ruled directly by Phraates and it would be a way of sending a message to the high king that Dura’s rulers were displeased with him. My ignoring his messages had probably already intimated that he was no longer welcome in the kingdom, but it would do no harm to emphasise the point.

The rest of the meeting consisted of Rsan reporting on renovations to the caravan park immediately north of the city, Aaron listing revenues earned from trade caravans, and Chrestus briefing us on army recruitment.

‘Most new recruits now come from within the kingdom,’ he informed us. ‘The days when the army was composed mostly of foreigners are long gone.’

The Exiles had always been composed almost exclusively of non-Parthians: men who had travelled from foreign lands, usually under the control of Rome, to fight for Dura, hence their name. In the early days, many harboured dreams of returning to their homelands as soldiers of Dura’s army, though I had always made it plain the kingdom’s army was for the defence of Dura and Parthia only. The Durans were initially composed of men recruited from within the Parthian

Empire, mostly runaway slaves eager to escape their masters, criminals with a price on their heads, and poor commoners who were technically free but were actually slaves to a life that was slowly grinding them into the earth.

I was slightly alarmed. ‘Does Dura have a large enough pool of potential recruits to maintain the army’s strength?’

Ira gave me a quizzical look. ‘Have you seen the latest population census, majesty?’

‘No.’

‘There are more people living outside the city than there are in it,’ he reported.

‘When I first came to Dura,’ I reminisced, ‘the only people living outside the city were lords and their retainers inhabiting walled strongholds. The land south of the city was a wasteland.’

Rsan was smiling as he too remembered the dark days when most of the desert had belonged to the Agraci, at the time sworn enemies of Parthia. But that had been forty years ago. Now the desert bloomed with crops and settlements. If I had achieved nothing else, that was a fine legacy to leave: peace and prosperity.

‘Peace and prosperity,’ I said absentmindedly.

They all looked at me, but Aaron seized upon my words.

‘Happily, majesty, we appear to be entering a new age for Dura, an age, as you say, of peace and prosperity. We now have permanent peace with Rome, the Agraci have been friends of Dura for many years and King of Kings Phraates is a young man with hopefully many years of life ahead of him.’

‘As Ira has alluded to, the kingdom’s population is expanding, which in turn means an increase in agricultural produce, leading to a further expansion of the kingdom’s population.’

‘The gods shine on Dura,’ agreed Almas.

An image came into my mind of a camp with no camels or horses where Gallia and I had been entertained one evening, where the hosts were not of this earth. The blessing of the immortals could be a double-edged sword, however. Aaron’s voice interrupted my daydream. He took one of Ira’s papyrus sheets and perused it before speaking.

‘Ten thousand foot soldiers, one thousand cataphracts, five thousand horse archers and two thousand squires, to say nothing of the queen’s bodyguard, Farid’s fifteen hundred camels and their drivers, and the muleteers who service the legions, all of which impose a considerable burden on the treasury, majesty.’

‘The army safeguards the kingdom,’ growled Chrestus.

‘Indeed, general,’ said Aaron, ‘but as the kingdom no longer appears to be in any great danger, one wonders if that army has outlived its usefulness.’

‘What!’ roared Chrestus, pointing at the window. ‘Why don’t you and your clerks take a trip outside the city to visit the legionary camp, in the centre of which is a tent housing the Staff of Victory. It is decorated with silver discs commemorating the army’s victories during four decades of service. The newest disc, recently cast, celebrates the Battle of Diyana, fought only a few months ago and only two hundred miles from this city.’

‘There will be no change in the army’s numbers,’ I said to calm Chrestus’ rage, much to the disappointment of Aaron.

‘But do not forward the results of your census to Ctesiphon, Ira,’ commanded Gallia. ‘There is no need to broadcast Dura’s prosperity to the whole world. It will only encourage envy and place the kingdom in jeopardy.’

Ira was delighted. ‘Yes, majesty, you can rely on my discretion.’

Aaron began drumming his fingers on the table top, much to the amusement of the three commanders present. Sophus, more attune to the workings of the treasury, allowed himself a wry smile. The annual tribute that all kingdoms paid to Ctesiphon was calculated according to the number of soldiers each kingdom could put into the field, the figure loosely based on the population figures for each realm. Dura’s population increase would result in a commensurate increase in the amount paid to the high king’s coffers, something neither Aaron nor the king and queen desired.

Immediately after the meeting I caught up with Gallia as she marched to the stables, prior to riding from the Citadel, where to I had no idea.

‘Did you have to threaten Klietas like that? Having involved him in your nefarious scheme, I would have thought you realised he is reliable.’

She stopped to face me. ‘He is a useful idiot, there is a difference.’

‘Explain.’

She gave me a malicious leer. ‘He is in love with Haya, which means he is like a red-hot piece of iron – easily malleable. He would walk over hot coals for her.’

‘You should not take advantage of his affections.’

‘Why not?’ she scoffed. ‘That is what men do to women all the time.’

‘There is no need for this, you know, this bitterness and resentment. We are both on the same side.’

She continued pacing towards the stables.

‘War is coming, Pacorus, any fool can see it.’

'What war?' I said loudly, causing stable hands within earshot to stop what they were doing to stare at us.

She turned to face me. 'You want peace and a happy retirement? The only way to ensure both is to eradicate our enemies before they have time to mobilise. I have the interests of Dura at heart. Do you?'

At the time I thought her attitude preposterous, but I had reckoned without her feminine intuition and had allowed my desire for peace to blind me to what was happening beyond Dura's borders.

The first sign of gathering storm clouds was the visit of Claudia to Dura.