

Chapter 2

With three months to go before the wedding and visit of Phraates, Dura became the centre of much activity. The guest list took on a life of its own and I worried that the banqueting hall, which could seat up to five hundred people, would prove inadequate to host the small army that had been invited, to say nothing of the entourage of the high king that would inevitably follow Phraates to my city. Rsan and Aaron, usually so parsimonious and careful when it came to official costs, suddenly became much more relaxed about royal expenditure. I found myself signing authorisation papers to purchase banners, lots of banners. Banners showing a red griffin on a white background, the horned bull of Babylon on a purple background and other banners showing an eagle holding a snake in its talons. They were the symbols of Dura, Babylon and Susiana respectively and were to be flown throughout the city to welcome Phraates, who was the ruler of Babylon and Susiana. He had also been the ruler of Persis but that was now the domain of King Silani, formerly the commander of the high king's bodyguard.

Chrestus balked at the suggestion all legionaries on duty should wear red and white plumes in their helmets, though he acquiesced when Aaron promised he would not quibble over his quartermaster's demands up to and immediately after the high king's visit. Chrestus got his replacement weapons and armour and Rsan got his plumed soldiers.

Dura was built as a frontier outpost, its ochre mud-brick walls, towers and Citadel constructed with strength in mind, not beauty. That strength had withstood Agraci war bands, Roman legions and Parthian armies with ease, the siting and construction of the city entirely functional, with no regard for aesthetic qualities or ornamentation. It was above all a military stronghold that proclaimed strength and endurance from its position atop the rock escarpment by the side of the Euphrates. It was a far cry from the ornate palaces and their gardens found in such cities as Babylon, Seleucia, Hatra and Susa. Or so I thought.

Equine training always took place in the early morning, just after dawn when the air was fresh following the cool of the night, the sun still rising in the east. The training fields to the west of the city became hubs of activity, though the absence of Sporaces and his horse archers and Azad and his cataphracts meant they were unusually quiet, save for the Amazons. By the time the sun was warming the earth to herald another blisteringly hot day, both riders and horses were making their way back to barracks to enjoy a hearty breakfast.

I pulled up Horns and dismounted from his saddle, Gallia beside me, as the Amazons trotted into the courtyard behind us. On the palace steps the palace steward was nodding his head as the tall, olive-skinned man beside him was pointing to the four corners of the courtyard.

A stable hand took Horns and Gallia's mare and we walked up the steps, the two stopping their conversation and bowing their heads.

'This is Adel, majesty,' Ashk informed me, 'sent from Hatra by your brother, King Gafarn.'

Adel reached inside his tunic and pulled out a papyrus scroll, which he handed to me.

Pacorus

As you are to be blessed with a visit from Phraates himself, I thought Dura could do with brightening up. This is Adel, one of my most talented gardeners. He can work miracles, which is just as well as Dura is an arid wasteland. We look forward to seeing the fruits of his labours.

Gafarn

I handed the note to Gallia.

'Dura is not Hatra, Adel. There are no springs here to bring forth water to nourish greenery.'

The gardener scratched his beard and nodded.

'I was warned by the king that conditions might be challenging, majesty.'

'But Adel has some interesting ideas, majesty,' said Ashk, 'and Lord Aaron has agreed to release funds for the additional staff.'

'What staff?'

'Two hundred gardeners, majesty,' answered Adel.

I was astounded. 'Two hundred, for what?'

'To turn your Citadel and palace into an oasis of green, majesty,' he informed me.

I knew the rudiments of garden design from my youth at Hatra, which had some of the most impressive royal gardens in the empire. But Hatra was fed by underground springs that brought cool water from the earth to fill ornamental ponds, create fountains and waterfalls and nourish the trees, flowers and shrubs all year round. Dura was blessed to be next to the Euphrates, a river that never dried up and gave life to the kingdom. But the city sat atop a rock escarpment and water had to be fetched from the river below. Water carriers were employed by the crown to ensure a constant supply of the precious liquid to the city, but no provision was made for the watering of trees and shrubs, which were considered a waste of precious resources. So the city and Citadel were devoid of foliage. That changed with the arrival of Adel and his gardeners.

He set about his task with gusto and soon the Citadel's courtyard was bursting with wooden tubs and terracotta pots filled with small cypress trees, which were associated with the mythical Life Tree and were assumed to have healing powers. I must confess I found Adel an interesting character, a man who had devoted his whole life to creating paradise on earth, or at least a manmade interpretation of that blessed place.

I estimated him to be in his late fifties, his face and arms turned dark brown by years spent outdoors in the sun, which had made his skin leathery and his face deeply lined. I had to admit the addition of greenery to the courtyard, far from being intrusive, was a welcome contribution and pleasing to the eye. We stood at the top of the palace steps as his small army of gardeners watered the ornamental junipers, cypress, rowan, pine and aspen, sweating under a merciless Mesopotamian sun.

'I will have to organise watering rotas to ensure the plants do not wither in the heat. Still, at least your palace now has the four elements, majesty.'

'Four elements?'

'Since earliest times man has sought to create paradise on earth by harnessing the four elements: sky, earth, water and plants.'

He pointed to the heavens. 'We have sky, the earth we stand on and now water and plants.'

'It is very different from Hatra.'

He nodded. 'Hatra is a living paradise on earth, an oasis of greenery and life in the middle of a barren desert and yet Dura is closer to the gods.'

'In what way?'

'In all palaces, it is traditional to construct a large pool in the front space of a royal garden to reflect the image of the palace and the sky,' he told me, 'to cement the realm of the earthly to the heavenly. Here at Dura, the Euphrates, the great giver of life created by the gods themselves, fulfils the function of binding the realm of the earthly to the heavenly. That is why this city is beloved of the gods.'

'My father did not think so when he first learned I had been made its ruler,' I remembered.

'I never knew your father, King Varaz, majesty, though I was privileged to speak to your mother on occasion. She was a keen gardener.'

An image flashed through my mind of my mother kneeling on a cushion with a small trowel in her hand as she planted flowers in her beloved garden at Hatra. How long ago that seemed.

'She certainly was.'

'You have visited the royal gardens at Ctesiphon, majesty?

I thought of the pools filled with fish and fountains, and peacocks strolling around the grounds.

'They are most impressive.'

Dura would never rival Ctesiphon for wealth and opulence, but Adel worked hard to make the city pleasing to the eye. Foliage appeared on the main street that led from the Palmyrene Gate to the Citadel, though Chrestus complained he had to post extra guards to prevent the plants and shrubs from being stolen. The general was in a testy mood in the period leading up to Phraates' visit, not because the high king was gracing Dura with his presence, but because he wanted to be in the east with Azad and Sporaces. He was commander of the army and half that army was hundreds of miles away, which sat ill with him. But he was able to take out his frustrations on the Durans and Exiles, organising long route marches in the desert and punishing battle simulations with the aid of Kalet and his lords and Malik and his warriors. When he had returned from one such exercise he came to the Citadel to make his report, meeting me at the armouries where I was making my weekly rounds of Arsam's hot hell on earth. Afterwards I walked back to the Citadel with Chrestus, a party of Exiles providing an escort.

'When will the high king be arriving, majesty?'

'Within the month, you will be pleased to know.'

'And then we can get back to normal?'

'I sincerely hope so.'

We entered the Citadel and paced towards the palace, walking up the steps to enter its porch, to be accosted by a young man. He jumped out from behind a large terracotta pot holding a flowering acanthus shrub. 'Armed' with a lyre that he held in the crook of his left arm while he plucked at the strings with his right hand, he was suddenly before me, singing a song in a most harmonious voice.

'Behold, behold, Pacorus of Dura.

'When enemies do threaten, he declares you go no further.

'Though outnumbered and bereft of allies he did not falter or fear,

'Riding towards the barren plain of Carrhae.'

Now his voice hit the high notes as he sang the name of the battle over and over again.

'Carrhae, Carrhae, Carrhae.'

A horrified Chrestus had had enough.

'Guards!' he shouted.

Two sentries standing next to the stone columns of the porch rushed forward with swords drawn, stopping the singer who threw up his hands.

'I meant no offence, majesty. I arrived this morning on the orders of Lord Byrd.'

I waved the guards back, Chrestus eyeing the young man suspiciously and ominously tapping the vine cane he was carrying against his thigh. Always a bad sign.

'Byrd?' I said. 'Put down your arms. Who are you.'

He flashed a smile to reveal a row of even white teeth.

'Nicias, lord.'

'You are Greek?'

Another smile. 'Yes, lord. Originally from Thebes but now resident in Damascus where I make my living composing and singing songs.'

There was a disapproving sigh from Chrestus beside me.

'I often sing for the governor of Syria,' Nicias informed me, 'who is a great friend of Lord Byrd. The governor suggested I come to Dura to compose songs about Parthia's great warlord. Lord Byrd has kindly financed my trip here, lord.'

'How generous,' groaned Chrestus.

'You travelled alone from Damascus?' I asked.

'No, lord, I am part of a group sent here by Lord Byrd for your entertainment.'

'Oh?'

'Poets, dancers, musicians and costumiers, lord.'

'Costumiers?' bellowed Chrestus. 'The king doesn't need anyone to dress him, boy. Byrd has more money than sense, if you ask me.'

With mounting trepidation, I walked from the porch into the reception hall and through to the throne room where Gallia was being entertained by a poetry recital. She sat on her throne listening to a young man with a soft voice reciting a tale of Remus, my old warhorse. Behind me Nicias plucked gently at his lyre until Chrestus turned on him.

'You continue to play that and I will shove it up your arse.'

'Chrestus,' I rebuked him mildly, 'don't be a barbarian. Don't you know Dura has become a place of beauty, civilisation and learning?'

'Quite right.'

I saw a beaming Alcaeus standing near the dais and an equally happy Scelias next to him. I had never seen so many Greeks in the throne room, all enjoying the soft voice of the handsome young poet who was coming to the end of his recital. His voice became tremulous as he told the

story of the death of Remus and my horse's journey to the afterlife. I stepped on to the dais and sat beside my wife as the poet's head dropped and he wiped a tear from his eye.

'That was most moving, Agis,' smiled Gallia, 'you must return to the palace this evening so the king may hear your poem in full.'

The young Greek bowed deeply to Gallia, who tossed him a gold coin. Agis caught the coin, knelt before the queen and spread his arms.

'I will write a poem about the Queen of Dura and the Amazons, which will rival the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* when it is finished.'

'Bravo,' shouted Alcaeus. 'The queen is worthy of such epics.'

Gallia, delighted that a handsome Greek poet had heard of her and the Amazons, stood and held out her hand.

'You shall be our guest at Dura for as long as it takes, Agis.'

The Greek sprang forward and planted a dainty kiss on my wife's hand.

'Your beauty and fame inspire me, majesty. I shall waste no more time but will away to start my work.'

'Hopefully back to Greece,' said Chrestus loudly.

Agis gave the general a disparaging glance and skipped from the throne room.

Alcaeus stepped forward. 'Heard of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Chrestus?'

'No.'

'They are epics from ancient history,' Alcaeus told him, 'written by a Greek named Homer and tell of the war between the Greeks and the Trojans. They are required reading for anyone who purports to consider themselves civilised.'

'I've never read them,' I confessed.

'Me neither,' added Gallia.

Alcaeus looked at Scelias who rolled his eyes.

'We live in a cultural wasteland,' lamented the head of the Sons of the Citadel.

'Culture doesn't stop foreign armies burning your home or killing your friends,' said Chrestus.

'No, indeed, general,' admitted Scelias, 'but it does save one from a slow, lingering death.'

Chrestus pointed his cane at him. 'Whenever I hear the word "culture", I reach for my sword.'

He pointed the cane at a rotund man with a neat beard and bald crown who was dressed in a white, knee-length tunic with red boots and fingers adorned with gold rings. Draped over his

left forearm was a blue cloak, which was fastened to the tunic at the left shoulder by a gold clasp. He stepped forward and bowed to Gallia and me.

‘Pontius Cinna at your service, dresser to Marcus Tullus Cicero, Governor of Syria.’

‘I thought Lucius Didius was the governor of Syria,’ I said.

‘Cicero the Younger is newly appointed, majesty,’ Cinna informed me. ‘And is eager to meet you when your daughter marries the son of Lord Kalet.’

I had extended an invitation to the governor of Syria following Gallia corresponding with Octavian concerning the return of the eagles lost at Carrhae and Lake Urmia. This had prompted a discourse between Phraates and Octavian that was leading to lasting peace between Parthia and Rome, or so it seemed and so I hoped. In the climate of improving relations between the empire and Rome, I thought it appropriate to extend an invitation to the governor to travel to Dura, not least because he could have a face-to-face meeting with Phraates.

‘Cicero the Younger is high in Octavian’s favour?’ I probed.

‘Very high, majesty,’ replied Cinna. ‘He took an active role in the defeat of Mark Antony, the *triumvir* having killed Cicero’s father. Both the governor and indeed Octavian himself are mindful of your own part in the defeat of Mark Antony.’

I was surprised. ‘My part?’

‘You alone were responsible for defeating Mark Antony before the walls of Phraaspa and later when the *triumvir* formed an alliance with Queen Aliyeh. The governor is in no doubt his defeats in Parthia contributed towards his eventual crushing at Actium.’

‘Are you a poet, too?’ asked Chrestus.

Cinna smiled. ‘I am the personal tailor to Governor Cicero, sent to Dura to fit the king’s new clothes.’

‘What new clothes?’ asked a bemused Gallia.

‘The ones ordered by Lord Byrd, majesty, and currently stored in his mansion in the city.’

I wasn’t really interested in a new set of clothes but I was eager to quiz the Roman on the whereabouts of Tiridates, who had sought and been granted sanctuary in Syria. I had gifted Byrd a mansion in the city in the hope he and Noora would make it their home. But they were happy living in a tent in Palmyra, albeit a large tent. So the mansion was unoccupied for most of the year, though Byrd did pay staff to maintain it and prevent it falling into disrepair. The building itself was an impressive mud-brick structure, built in the Greek style like all the buildings in Dura, specifically according to Hippodamian principles, named after the Greek architect Hippodamus of Miletus. A two-storey building, the first floor contained bedrooms and a library, the ground floor an entrance hall, kitchens, study, dining room, entertaining lounge and

colonnaded garden. We availed ourselves of the study when I had my fitting, Cinna overseeing a young male apprentice who took my measurements. Gallia reclined on a couch sipping wine as Cinna studied my attire.

‘Are they your working clothes, majesty?’

I looked down at my simple white tunic, tan leggings and leather boots.

‘This is my normal attire.’

Cinna’s brow creased into a frown. ‘Oh, dear.’

He clapped his hands to prompt the appearance of another young assistant, also male, young and attractive. The youth was carrying a white silk robe, upon which were stitched red griffins.

‘Try this on, majesty. Lord Byrd gave me your approximate measurements but the robe can of course be adjusted.’

I unstrapped my sword belt and handed it to Gallia before putting on the robe, which was as light as a feather. It had long, loose-fitting sleeves and was open at the front to facilitate ease of fitting. The boy handed me a red silk sash that Cinna informed me was to be used as a belt to keep the robe closed.

‘What about my sword belt?’ I asked.

Cinna tutted. ‘No weapons to be worn with this robe, majesty. Presumably you have guards to keep you safe?’

Gallia laughed. Half a dozen Exiles had escorted us to the mansion but I felt naked without my *spatha*.

‘Is Tiridates still in Syria?’ I asked.

A servant handed me a chalice of wine, proffering another to Cinna.

‘Yes, majesty, I believe he is.’

‘Where?’

His confident manner disappeared as his piggy eyes darted between Gallia and me.

‘Near the coast, majesty, or so I am told.’

‘Have no fear, Cinna,’ Gallia reassured him, ‘the king has no intention of sending assassins to kill him, though we cannot vouch the same for King of Kings Phraates.’

The boy tied the sash around my waist.

‘The high king will not try to kill Tiridates while his son is in Rome,’ I said.

‘The governor informed me the child is under the care and protection of Octavian himself,’ said Cinna.

The tailor stepped back and admired his creation, his gaze concentrating on my boots. More tutting.

‘They will not do, not at all. Bring the boots.’

The youth with the tape measure disappeared and reappeared moments later with a pair of beautiful red leather boots. Cinna saw my admiring look.

‘You’ll not find a finer pair in the whole of Mesopotamia, majesty. They are made from ox leather prepared by a vegetable tanning process that takes two years to complete. They are more comfortable than a pair of slippers yet very durable for outdoor wear.’

The youth placed the boots on the floor. I removed my own footwear and slipped my feet into them. Wide straps that passed under the feet and crisscrossed up the lower leg secured the soft leather uppers. They were certainly comfortable and as a nice finishing touch were adorned with silver griffins. I liked them. I stepped back and faced Gallia.

‘What do you think?’

‘Very kingly.’

‘I have more robes in blue, red and purple, majesty, with corresponding complementary sashes. I assume you will be taking them all?’

‘He will,’ smiled Gallia.

‘Lord Byrd has also paid for a number of dresses for yourself, majesty,’ Cinna told Gallia. ‘Perhaps you might send your female dressers to collect them later.’

‘I have no dressers,’ Gallia told him.

Cinna was perplexed. ‘Then who dresses you, majesty?’

‘I dress myself,’ she told him.

‘No slaves, majesty?’

‘No slaves.’

Cinna was shocked. ‘But I have seen slaves in your palace.’

‘They are paid servants,’ I said, ‘free men and women who are hired for their services.’

‘Has Tiridates indicated he will stay in Syria?’ I asked, changing the subject.

‘I am not privy to that information, majesty,’ said Cinna.

‘Does he have any supporters around him?’ queried Gallia.

‘Again, majesty, you must forgive my ignorance but I do not know.’

Afterwards, wearing my new robes, I walked back to the Citadel with Gallia.

‘When the Roman governor arrives we can question him more closely about the whereabouts and motives of Tiridates,’ she said.

‘It seems strange he is lingering in Syria. I suspect he is biding his time until conditions are right.’

‘To return to Parthia?’

I nodded. ‘He has had a taste of being high king and I doubt the prospect of being an exile in Syria holds much allure.’

‘We should get Byrd to locate him,’ she said. ‘He has offices and contacts throughout Syria.’

‘To what end?’

‘To kill Tiridates, of course.’

I stopped to look at her.

‘If we kill Tiridates, Octavian might retaliate by murdering the son of Phraates.’

‘Not if we are careful.’

‘Careful?’

‘A pretty girl could infiltrate his household easily enough.’

My blood ran cold. ‘I was not aware the Daughters of Dura were being trained as assassins.’

She continued walking back to the Citadel.

‘They are trained to be loyal to their king and queen and their homeland. Or I could send one of the younger Amazons. It makes no difference.’

‘And when your girl or young woman has slit Tiridates’ throat, what then? She will be far from home and alone. You would be condemning her to death, a slow death nailed to a cross.’

We walked into the Citadel, guards at the gates snapping to attention as we passed by. I dismissed our escort and the duty centurion coming from the office just inside the gates instructed them to return to barracks. He looked surprised to see me in such rich attire but composed himself and saluted us both.

‘She would not be alone,’ said Gallia. ‘Some of Kalet’s men would be her escort, or Malik’s warriors if we asked him. Tiridates deserves to die.’

I could not argue with her logic, though I would not sanction an assassination attempt.

‘We do nothing until after the wedding.’

She shrugged. ‘As you wish.’

We walked up the palace steps.

‘Promise me you will not take matters into your own hands,’ I beseeched.

She raised a well-manicured eyebrow. ‘Not until after the wedding. You have my word.’

The presence in Syria of the man who had been responsible for igniting a civil war in Parthia, in addition to causing the deaths of Nergal and Praxima, meant he could expect no mercy from Gallia still bent on exacting revenge. But the crushing of Tiridates' rebellion, combined with the negotiations that were ongoing between Octavian and Phraates, had resulted in the prospect of a lasting peace on the empire's western border. I saw no reason to endanger the blossoming relations between Rome and Parthia, not least because there existed a very real danger in the east. Kujula had recovered from his battle wounds and his gaze was once again focused on expanding the Kushan Empire at the expense of Parthia. Fortunately, the arrival of King of Kings Phraates focused Gallia's attention on Dura and her daughter's wedding rather than on murdering the former King of Aria.

Dura suddenly seemed small and overcrowded as the guests and their entourages began to arrive. The Governor of Syria, Cicero the Younger, arrived in the company of Byrd, Noora, Malik, Jamal and Riad, his son who had recently returned to Palmyra. We greeted them in the palace, Byrd complimenting me on my new clothes and Malik asking if I had lost my sword. The governor, in his late thirties, his hair receding, reminded me of one of Aaron's clerks but was most courteous and softly spoken. Byrd had thought it prudent for him to be lodged in his mansion for the duration of his stay, which made sense as he and my former chief scout were friends and the governor was also familiar with Malik and his family.

The next to arrive were Gafarn and Diana, though without Prince Pacorus who was ruling Elymais while Queen Cia concentrated on giving birth to the kingdom's heir. It seemed strange not to see the prince at the head of Hatra's Royal Bodyguard, though nothing could diminish the happiness we felt at the arrival of our oldest friends. When he had finished chiding me about my new apparel and complimenting me on the greenery in the Citadel, Gafarn had some interesting news from Hatra. We were sitting on the palace terrace, enjoying a vivid sunset of a white sun dropping in a red western sky, the heat of the day yet to leave the earth.

'Atrax has left Hatra,' announced Gafarn.

'I'm amazed he was able to summon the strength to leave his bed,' remarked Gallia, noticing Gafarn was rubbing his right leg. Diana saw her stare.

'He tripped and fell in the palace a few days ago and cut his leg.'

'Wretched thing won't heal,' complained Gafarn.

'You should see Alcaeus,' I said.

He rolled his eyes. 'I've seen a small army of physicians, plus a host of priests, sorceresses and faith healers, all of whom got word of my ailment and beat a path to the palace. Their wittering and wailing were an excellent cure for insomnia but did nothing for my leg.'

'So what are you taking for it?' asked Gallia.

'Keeping it clean and fresh bandages every day,' he told her. 'It's only a large cut. I've suffered worse.'

'But you were younger then,' I said. 'You must take care of yourself.'

'Yes, father,' he grinned.

'So, Prince Atrax survived his wounds,' I said.

The son of the late, unlamented King Darius of Media had been grievously wounded during Darius' abortive invasion of Hatra, which had resulted in the king's death. His son had made it back to Irbil but was expected to succumb to his wounds. He was still on the verge of death when he, his mother and sisters left Irbil in the aftermath of Aliyeh's suicide to seek sanctuary in Hatra.

'It was a miracle,' said Diana. 'Prayers were said day and night for the prince and the high priest of the Great Temple had been planning for his funeral. But the gods smiled on Atrax and he slowly recovered.'

Gafarn nodded. 'He made a full recovery, and as soon as he was able to walk declared his intention to leave Hatra.'

'And go where?' enquired Gallia.

'Zeugma,' he replied.

The city on the Euphrates had formally been part of the Parthian Empire but its ruler, the debauched King Darius, had defected to the Romans for a large bribe. Darius was long dead, but his city thrived under Roman rule, being on the Silk Road and benefiting from its riches.

'Another penniless prince,' said Gallia.

'Not so penniless,' her friend informed her. 'When they left Irbil, Atrax's two sisters took the crown jewels with them, along with a substantial amount of gold.'

I remembered the two young women at Aliyeh's funeral. Darya and Setareh had appeared vulnerable and lost.

'They have their grandmother's propensity for scheming,' said Gafarn bluntly. 'Unlike their mother who has joined the Sisters of Shamash.'

The Sisters of Shamash was a religious order dedicated to the care of unfortunates, its female devotees living lives of chastity, poverty and obedience to the Sun God. My own sister Adeleh was a member and now it seemed Queen Parisa had joined the order.

'Of course, Parisa will have to serve two years as a novice before she becomes a fully-fledged member of the Sisters,' said Diana.

‘The death of her husband was the final straw,’ remarked Gafarn, ‘but Adeleh informs us she is happy living the simple life of a servant of Shamash.’

‘That’s the last we will see of Atrax and his sisters, then,’ I surmised.

Gafarn looked at me. ‘I hope so, because his character leaves a lot to be desired. He hates you, of course.’

I sipped at my wine. ‘Me? Why? What have I done to wrong him?’

‘You underestimate yourself, Pacorus,’ smiled Gafarn. ‘You killed his uncle, Prince Alexander, was responsible for his grandfather walking with a limp, and caused his grandmother to take her own life. Or so young Atrax believes.’

I was most disappointed. ‘I saved his life, and those of his sisters. If Spartacus had had his way, they would be rotting in cells in Vanadzor by now, or worse.’

‘Talking of Spartacus, can we assume he will not be attending the wedding?’ asked Gallia.

Diana avoided her friend’s eyes and Gafarn’s head dropped.

‘He is stubborn,’ said the King of Hatra, ‘I apologise on his behalf.’

‘He seems to hate the world and everything in it,’ lamented Diana.

‘Parthia is fortunate to have him guarding its northern border,’ I said, ‘but we have to accept Spartacus is a man who does not forgive or forget. I assume he has not visited the new King and Queen of Media?’

Gafarn laughed. ‘He holds you responsible.’

I was not amused. ‘Me? As I seem to remember, it was Rasha, cooperating closely with our wives, who instigated Akmon becoming the ruler of Media.’

Gafarn winked at Gallia. ‘We know that, but Spartacus, for all his faults, loves his wife dearly and so refuses to believe she was the progenitor of the plot to make Akmon ruler of Media. He loves and respects his mother, of course, and so believes she is blameless in all things. He respects his aunt greatly and though he accepts Gallia *was* responsible for Akmon’s elevation, he also accepts she was grieving deeply for the loss of Nergal and Praxima, so in his own way he has absolved her of any blame.’

A wicked grin spread across Gafarn’s face. ‘So that leaves you, Pacorus, to be the focus of my son’s wrath.’

‘There are no words,’ I replied.

In truth Spartacus did not occupy my mind at all as the wedding drew nearer. Ashk showed me the seating arrangements for the wedding feast, Chrestus accompanied me as we walked the route the newlyweds and their guests would take from the Temple of Shamash, located around half a mile from the Citadel, back to the palace, and Aaron briefed me on the

expected costs of the ceremony and entertaining Phraates and his entourage. Chrestus had requested, and had been granted, money for new mail tunics and helmets for the soldiers lining the wedding route, as well as those who would be fulfilling the role of guard of honour when the high king arrived. Hundreds of plumes had also been purchased to decorate the helmets of legionaries.

I waved the papyrus scroll at Aaron. 'I did not realise red and white plumes could be so expensive.'

'The colours of Dura, majesty, to symbolise the red griffin on a white background.'

'Yes, of course.'

'Can I say we are all very excited about the high king's visit, especially Rsan. He is like a man reborn.'

I had to admit Aaron was right and for that reason alone all the expenditure and inconvenience was worth it to see my governor truly happy. For him Phraates' visit was the culmination of a lifetime's dedication to Dura and the empire. I just hoped Phraates treated his visit to Dura as a privilege and not a chore.

The high king arrived on a searing hot summer's day, his great pavilion taking shape on the eastern side of the Euphrates, the sun sitting high above it in a cloudless sky. I sent Chrestus and a mounted party to the sprawling encampment of multi-coloured tents, wagons, camels, horses and soldiers. Gafarn sent the commander of his bodyguard to accompany him, as the land across the river was Hatran territory, though I had declared Dura alone would pay for the upkeep of the high king and his followers for the duration of their stay. Due to the temperature the high king would rest in his pavilion before journeying to the city on the morrow, but as was custom I sent an official party to his residence to inform him the requirements of his entourage would be provided for by the Kingdom of Dura. It was a mere formality because as soon as the royal party was within sight I had ordered supplies to be sent across the river.

Lucius Varsas, Roman, graduate of the Sons of the Citadel and the army's quartermaster general, had been given the responsibility of supplying Phraates' encampment. He had spent weeks preparing the logistics of such an exercise, liaising with the deputy head of the camel corps, who had remained in the city in Farid's absence, concerning supplying the high king's compound. Water for men and beasts would be provided by the Euphrates, but the hundreds of camels and horses also required fodder. The soldiers and servants of the high king also had to be fed, which meant a steady stream of carts leaving the city each morning loaded with bread, cheese, beer, wine, freshly caught fish, fruit and vegetables. Cattle, goats, chickens and pigs would be transported alive across the river, to be slaughtered, butchered and prepared for

consumption by imperial cooks. Feeding the high king's entourage was like preparing for a military campaign and fortunately Lucius was up to the task.

I invited Rsan, Alcaeus, Aaron and Scelias to the palace terrace the night before Phraates entered the city, the high king's camp across the river being illuminated by dozens of burning braziers and campfires.

'Everything is ready?' I asked Rsan.

'All is ready, majesty,' he replied, gazing in wonder at the great camp on the other side of the Euphrates.

Alcaeus gently laid a hand on his friend's shoulder.

'He's just a man, Rsan, and is subject to the same bodily functions as all of us.'

'The more so if his diet is excessively rich,' added Scelias.

'The richest if the daily requirements of his court are anything to go by,' said Aaron.

But nothing could detract from the sense of awe and wonder Rsan was experiencing as he gazed upon the camp of Phraates, son of Orodes, grandson of another Phraates and great grandson of Sinatruces. The high king was more than just another ruler, he was the living embodiment of the idea of Parthia – an empire of disparate kingdoms, races and religions – the thread that bound those differences together. And after an unsteady start Phraates was finally becoming the high king we all wanted him to be.

'Tomorrow will be a great day for Dura,' I told them. 'For the first time in its history, Dura will receive an official visit from the king of kings of the empire. It will be your day, Rsan, for you above all have been the steady hand that has guided this kingdom through both prosperous and perilous times.'

He bowed his head. 'Thank you, majesty.'

Gallia stepped forward and planted a kiss on his cheek.

'We are in your debt, Rsan.'

The governor, a stickler for protocol, stiffened slightly at such familiarity but his eyes were moist with tears of gratitude and joy.

'Let us hope, now that the time of adversity has passed,' said Scelias, 'Dura does not enter an age of decadence.'

I looked at him. 'Decadence?'

He returned my gaze. 'Rich apparel, extravagant expenditure. These are the outward signs of decadence, which invariably corrupt a kingdom as sure as a plague of locusts strips the land bare.'

'I can assure you,' I informed my stoic Greek, 'the change of clothes is a purely temporary measure, as is the current, admittedly high, level of expenditure. We don't want Phraates to think Dura is an impoverished backwater, Scelias.'

'If Phraates has a brain,' he said, 'he would have realised years ago that Dura is the brightest jewel in his crown, whose army has saved his hide on numerous occasions and lately restored him to his throne.'

'Well said,' remarked Alcaeus.

'Not all that glitters is gold,' continued Scelias. 'Only a fool mistakes displays of opulence and wealth as indicators of real power.'

He made a great sweep with his arm. 'Real power can be found in the most modest of places, forged by keen minds and determined spirits. I hope you will show Phraates the Staff of Victory, lord, because such a simple totem speaks volumes concerning real wealth and power.'

Real wealth and power were on display the next day when Phraates entered the city. The Exiles and Durans, plumes and all, lined the route from the pontoon bridges that spanned the Euphrates all the way to the Palmyrene Gate, and from there to the Citadel. In the Citadel itself an honour guard stood to attention and Kalet and his lords stood behind Gallia and me at the foot of the palace steps. Flanking us were Malik, Jamal and Riad, Byrd and Noora, Gafarn and Diana, and Eszter and Dalir, my daughter actually attired in a dress, her arms bare, following a heated argument between father and daughter in which I suggested she might like to try looking feminine for once instead of a desert raider. To one side stood Chrestus, his senior officers, all sporting large crests in their helmets, Lucius Varsas, Rsan, Aaron, Alcaeus and Scelias. All were dressed in their finery, including the lords and their wives who lived in the city, mostly former merchants who had lived in Dura for many years and had been ennobled as a reward for their services to the city and kingdom.

The morning was warm and getting hotter as we waited for the arrival of the high king. The courtyard was full of soldiers and civilians, and behind them, near the stables, stood stable hands, farriers, veterinaries, servants, smiths, bakers and armourers, all craning their necks to get a glimpse of the demi-god who ruled the Parthian Empire. We heard his arrival before clapping eyes on him, the cheers of the crowds lining the main thoroughfare growing in volume as he neared the Citadel. I smiled when I heard cries of 'Phraates, Phraates', and glanced at Rsan who was bursting with pride. I was glad his friend Alcaeus was standing next to him because when Phraates appeared he might pass out.

The irritating sound of kettledrums, a low rumble that I had come to loathe on the battlefield for its intense annoyance, reached my ears, heralding the arrival of Phraates. Before

the pair of mounted kettledrummers appeared, young girls carrying baskets of white petals from the lotus flower appeared at the gates, scattering petals on the ground to create the image of a white carpet. The lotus flower was associated with innocence and holiness and the petals symbolised the sacred nature of the high king's visit. The girls emptied their baskets as the kettledrummers rode into the foliage-adorned courtyard, their incessant thumping mercifully drowned out by a fanfare of trumpets from the musicians beside the colour party. And then Phraates himself appeared, dressed in a rich purple tunic and purple leggings, his boots white leather adorned with silver clasps. Behind him rode his Babylonian Guard – men in purple uniforms wearing shimmering dragon-skin armour cuirasses: a thick hide vest covered with overlapping silver plates that protected the chest and back. Their burnished open-faced helmets sported huge purple plumes, their swords were carried in purple scabbards and their purple saddlecloths were decorated with golden bull symbols. The bull, symbol of Babylon, was also a totem of strength, power and rage.

Beside the mounted guards walked Scythian axe men: big men with broad shoulders who cradled their massive war axes menacingly. Shields were strapped to their backs and wicked long knives dangled in sheaths attached to their belts. Looking out of place among such fearsome individuals was a slave who dashed forward to stand beside the high king's horse. The royal stool bearer's job was to ensure Phraates never dismounted from his horse without the aid of a step.

'Perhaps we should hire one of those,' whispered Gafarn, Phraates dismounting from his horse and walking towards us.

As one we bowed our heads to him, the fanfare ceased and the kettledrummers desisted their din.

'Welcome to Dura, highness,' I said, 'please avail yourself of our hospitality.'

Phraates smiled and looked around at the courtyard, guards standing to attention on the walls and at the top of the steps, where normally we would have stood to greet guests. But protocol dictated that no king or queen should stand higher than the king of kings and so we stood at the foot of the steps.

'I am glad to be here,' smiled Phraates, 'for too long I have been confined within Ctesiphon's walls.'

He held out his arm. 'Claudia, you will be my guide to your home.'

My daughter, as ever dressed in black robes, had dismounted from her horse and now walked up to Gallia, embracing her mother and then Diana, leaving Phraates' arm in mid-air. She kissed me on the cheek.

'Introduce him to Rsan,' I said quietly, 'it would mean a lot to the governor.'

She took the high king's hand and whispered into his ear. Phraates turned and walked towards Rsan, the old man gulping and staring in wonder at the tall, now athletic young man before him, the gleaming golden crown of Babylon on his head. He bowed deeply to Phraates, causing me some concern his back might lock. But it did not, and he raised his head to look at Phraates but two paces away.

'Governor Rsan, Princess Claudia informs me it is you who has been the bedrock that has allowed King Pacorus to provide such sterling service to the empire. On behalf of myself and the Parthian Empire, I thank you for your services.'

'You, you are most kind, highness,' stammered Rsan.

Phraates smiled, turned and walked up the steps beside Claudia, the rest of us in tow. Rsan, not believing the high king had taken the time to speak to him personally, stood rooted to the spot, awe-struck.

I thought Phraates would make some condescending remark about Dura being tiny compared to Ctesiphon, or indeed Babylon and Seleucia, but he was all smiles and polite conversation as we strolled through the entrance hall into the throne room, the commander of the high king's guard falling in behind his lord. Phraates stopped when he spotted my griffin banner hanging above the dais, pointing at the flag.

'Is that it?'

Claudia nodded. 'Yes, lord.'

He walked forward to step on the dais, peering up at the banner.

'It looks freshly made and yet it is how old?'

Claudia looked at me.

'It was gifted to me forty years ago, highness,' I told him.

'And it has been carried in every battle you have fought in?' asked Phraates.

'Yes, highness.'

'And yet it does not have a mark on it. It was given to you by the sorceress Dobbai, your daughter informs me.'

'Yes, highness.'

'And where did she get it from?'

'I never asked, highness.'

He turned to look at me. 'The gods themselves must have forged it; for it is well known the army of Dura has never tasted defeat. Who is entrusted with its care when you go to war?'

'The commander of my Amazons, highness,' Gallia told him.

'A woman?'

‘An Amazon,’ she shot back.

‘Yes, of course.’

On the terrace we enjoyed refreshments under the large awning to shade us from the sun. There was a slight breeze blowing from the east that made the terrace pleasant enough as we reclined on soft couches and Phraates rested his feet on his footstool. Only the kings and queens were in attendance, plus Byrd and Noora. My former chief scout had made an effort with his attire and was dressed in a fresh robe, Noora looking delightful in a white dress complemented by gold rings on her fingers and a gold tiara. I chuckled when I compared Byrd’s modest attire to the gold and silver jewellery and silk clothes on display. He was probably wealthier than all of us put together following his reward for financing the campaign that put Phraates back on his throne.

I beckoned Eszter and Dalir forward as Phraates nibbled on a slice of melon.

‘This is my daughter Princess Eszter, highness, and her future husband Dalir, son of Kalet, Dura’s chief lord.’

They both knelt before the high king and bowed their heads.

‘Princess Claudia informs me it is the custom for Dura’s lords to build their own desert strongholds.’

Dalir nodded. ‘Yes, highness.’

‘As a wedding gift, you will be given fifty talents of gold so you can construct your own home in the desert.’

Eszter, unused to palace protocol at the best of times, looked up and gave Phraates a dazzling smile.

‘You are most kind, lord, and when it is finished you will be our first guest.’

She then went to embrace him, prompting the commander of Phraates’ bodyguard, a strapping individual in his early forties, to step forward gripping the hilt of his sword.

‘You are dismissed, Eszter,’ I said quickly. ‘To touch the body of the high king means death.’

Dalir grabbed her arms and bundled her away, bowing his head as he did so. Claudia rolled her eyes and Eszter gave her a withering look.

‘You are too generous, highness,’ I said, the officer stepping away from his lord.

‘I owe a great debt to Dura,’ said Phraates, ‘as I do to you, Lord Byrd.’

Byrd smiled and bowed his head, looking happy because the high king had finally mastered the correct pronunciation of his name.

‘The Roman governor of Syria is at Dura?’

‘Yes, lord,’ said Byrd. ‘He good man.’

‘That remains to be seen.’

After half an hour of polite conversation about nothing in particular, Phraates declared he wished to visit the legionary camp outside the city. It was approaching midday now and the summer heat was intense, but he was not to be dissuaded and so we left the terrace. Gafarn, using his aching leg as an excuse, declared his intention to stay in the palace, while Byrd, who had a permanent limp, also declined to accompany us, citing his affliction.

‘I hope you are not going to abandon me as well, King Malik,’ pleaded Phraates.

‘It will be an honour to journey with you, lord,’ replied Malik.

I looked at Gallia who smiled with satisfaction. We had lived to see the day when the ruler of the Parthian Empire was treating the leader of the Agraci people like an old friend. In that moment, I felt great happiness that all the years toiling to convince Parthians that the Agraci could be valued allies had seemingly paid off.

Phraates walked from the terrace beside Malik.

‘It is good to see you again, majesty.’

I turned to see the commander of Phraates’ bodyguard before me, helmet in the crook of his arm. He looked vaguely familiar but I could not place him.

‘Forgive me, but my memory fails me as to our last meeting.’

‘This is Commander Adapa, father,’ said Claudia beside me, ‘you last met him when he was about to escort the high king from Seleucia.’

The gravity of her words struck me like a punch to the stomach. Adapa, the former soldier of Babylon. Adapa the leper.

‘By the gods.’

Before I knew it, I was recoiling from him, tripping over a couch to land on my back. Everyone turned to see what the commotion was about as I lay on my back staring up at the man who had once been a leper. *Was* a leper, and yet did not have a mark or blemish on his face. Gallia rushed over.

‘Are you hurt?’

‘What? No.’

She helped me up, Gafarn finding it most amusing.

‘Too much wine on an empty stomach, Pacorus.’

I ignored him. ‘How can this be?’

‘Simple enough,’ said Gallia, ‘if you don’t look where you are going you will end up flat on your back.’

'Not that,' I snapped. 'This is Adapa.'

She looked at me with a blank expression.

'The leper leader, at Seleucia.'

Her jaw dropped as she beheld the living miracle before her. Claudia walked over and took my arm.

'It is rude to stare, father,'

I looked back at the blushing Adapa.

'That is Adapa,' I said.

'Commander Adapa, father, that is his official title.'

'You cured him?'

She shook her head. 'There are blessed pools in the Alborz where afflictions can be washed away.'

'It is a miracle,' said Gallia.

We followed Phraates and Malik who had resumed their amble, Adapa rushing past us to catch up with his lord. The two Scythians who had been waiting in the hall adjacent to the terrace fell in beside him.

'You remember the lepers who were with Adapa?' Claudia asked.

I nodded, their disfigured limbs and faces filling my mind.

'They were in the courtyard earlier.'

'Lepers in the palace?' I said loudly, Diana and Gafarn turning to stare at me.

'As they are members of the high king's bodyguard, they can hardly be lepers, father.'

'They were all cured?' I was astounded.

Claudia gave me a malicious grin. 'They were given life to replace the living death they were enduring. Such a gift means they will be absolutely loyal to Phraates.'

'How so?' asked Gallia.

'Because I said the gods would make them lepers again if they were disloyal, mother.'

'Is that true?' I queried.

'The gods give and they take,' she shrugged.

In the courtyard Phraates' horse was brought to him, along with our own. Adapa mounted his own horse and I scanned the riders of the Babylonian Guard for the other lepers but saw only men in their prime. We trotted from the Citadel, flanked by Scythians on foot and a large detachment of legionaries led by Chrestus. The searing heat had dispersed the crowds and the road to the Palmyrene Gate was largely free of traffic, sensible people seeking shade during the

hottest part of the day. In front of us Phraates chatted to Malik and behind trotted five hundred Babylonian Guards.

‘You possess a great gift,’ I told Claudia beside me, ‘for you have the power to cure diseases that have plagued man for centuries.’

‘You think I should announce the presence of the healing pools in the Alborz to the whole world?’ she asked.

‘Naturally.’

‘I would rather slit my own wrists,’ she scoffed, ‘mankind is inherently corrupt and diseased, father, that is why the gods punish us with ailments and disfigurement.’

‘That is harsh.’

She threw back her head and laughed, which turned into a malevolent cackle.

‘You are a dreamer, father, a man who longs for a world that will never exist. Like a small child chasing a rainbow, you seek to find a pot of gold, except your dream is to see the world free from war, want and corruption. But it is a dream, and not a desirable one, for what would men such as you do if there was no war in the world?’

The legionary camp was, as usual, half-empty when the Durans and Exiles were in residence. A substantial number of soldiers were manning the mud-brick forts spaced at five-mile intervals north and south of the city. Others were garrisoning the city itself, and some centuries were conducting desert marches. Outside the camp new recruits were learning how to use wooden copies of the *gladius* against wooden posts sunk in the ground, under the watchful eyes of centurions armed with vine canes that they used liberally on the trainees when they failed to obey instructions.

Phraates was genuinely interested and halted his horse to watch the trainees sweating profusely as they wielded training shields and wooden swords.

Phraates pointed at the recruits. ‘They are wooden weapons and shields?’

‘Yes, highness,’ I said, ‘though heavier than the real things to strengthen the recruits’ arms.’

A recruit nearest to our party slashed at the post with his sword, prompting the centurion behind him to whack him on the arm and berate him loudly.

Phraates was confused. ‘He hit the target.’

‘He hit the target, highness, yes,’ I said, ‘but Dura’s foot soldiers are taught to stab, thrust, feint and lunge with the short sword. There is no place for wild slashing in the ranks.’

‘Where do you recruit your soldiers from, majesty?’ enquired Adapa.

‘Any male who presents himself at the recruitment office in the city will be considered, irrespective of his status, subject to certain conditions.’

‘Which are?’ asked Phraates.

‘They must have all their limbs, be of average height or above, and possess good eyesight.’

‘What if they are runaway slaves?’ asked Adapa.

‘We make no distinction in Dura between freemen and women who volunteer for service in the army,’ said Gallia, ‘and those who have escaped from bondage.’

‘Their former owners do not seek compensation for their lost property?’ asked Phraates.

Gallia bristled at his words. ‘In such a situation, highness, the court of trial by combat will decide.’

‘I do not understand,’ said Phraates.

‘The former slave turned soldier and his former master are given the opportunity to fight each other to decide the merits of the claim,’ replied Gallia. ‘Curiously, fat, indolent masters are reluctant to try their luck against a trained soldier.’

Claudia laughed and Malik grinned, though Phraates said nothing but nudged his horse forward. We entered the camp and rode to the three tents positioned to the rear of the commander’s tent in the centre of the huge compound. The trio of tents woven from goat’s hair as used by the Agraci, housed the semi-religious totems of the Durans and Exiles and the army’s Staff of Victory.

Each tent housed a single emblem and Phraates wished to see them all. The first tent contained the Durans’ golden griffin, fashioned years before by a testy Greek named Demetrius. Each tent was guarded by a detail commanded by a centurion, who insisted all visitor weapons were surrendered before entry, though only Adapa was forced to give up his sword as the rest of us were unarmed. Phraates admired the gold griffin before walking to the middle tent that housed the Staff of Victory, a simple *kontos* shaft decorated with silver discs, each one commemorating a military triumph.

For the army the staff was a source of immense pride; for me, a reminder of friends and family I had lost over the years. At Susa I had lost my father; at Hatra, when the Armenian hordes had been destroyed, I had seen Lucius Domitus slain by a slingshot; at Carrhae, Vagharsh, my faithful banner man, had met his end; and recently at Ctesiphon where my dear friend Silaces had fallen. Blood is the currency of war but I had paid a high price for glory over the years.

Phraates was bedazzled by the Staff of Victory, insisting I inform him of the significance of every disc; Gallia pointing out the battles his father had taken part in. His head dropped when she had finished.

‘I have never been victorious in battle,’ he said softly, almost apologetically.

'You are still young, highness,' I said, 'besides, the empire has a chance to be free from Roman aggression. Negotiation is always better than fighting.'

'Tell me, King Pacorus, if you were me, would you surrender the captured eagles to Octavian?'

'Yes.'

'Even though it would cause discord within the empire.'

'Discord?'

He sighed. 'There would be many who would view such a gesture as a slight to the pride of the empire.'

'Only those who took the eagles residing in your Hall of Victory have the right to decide whether giving them back to the Romans is a dishonourable act,' I told him. 'Of the ones taken at Carrhae, only I, Queen Gallia and King Spartacus should be consulted, if you wish to solicit opinion. Similarly, of the two taken at Lake Urmia, only King Spartacus and Queen Rasha should be consulted.'

We walked from the cool of the tent into the searing heat of the sun.

'King Spartacus is an implacable enemy of Rome,' said Phraates, 'he will never agree to giving the eagles back.'

'Then don't ask him.'

He gave me a curious look. 'And risk offending him?'

'King Spartacus is capable of starting an argument in an empty room, highness, though if he should take exception to your decision you can remind him you are high king, not he.'

We entered the tent housing the Exiles' silver lion, guards eyeing us to ensure those they did not recognise did not get too close to the sacred totem. Phraates studied the lion, which in truth was not as inspiring as the gold griffin, but was intoxicating nevertheless.

'Spartacus is useful to secure the empire's northern border,' he said, 'especially as he possesses a very capable army. I admit I have indulged him, but the gold I have gifted him is spent on that army. He also keeps Armenia in check.'

I was surprised. 'I thought Artaxias is now an ally of Parthia.'

He strolled from the tent. 'For the moment, yes, but the heirs of Tigranes the Great do not take kindly to being subservient to Parthia, or Rome.'

I remembered Tigranes; a big man with big ambitions who thought Parthia was his toy. He had died mysteriously at the height of his powers and my mind went back to a strange ceremony Dobbai had conducted to enlist the aid of the gods to safeguard the empire. The price for the assistance of the immortals had been a heavy one and of those who had taken part in the

ceremony, only I had survived. But Tigranes had died and the power of Armenia had been broken, so much so that the Sarmatians – allies of Spartacus – now occupied the Armenian city of Van and the surrounding land.

The next day my youngest daughter married Dalir in the city's temple dedicated to Shamash. A far cry from the Great Temple at Hatra, it was nevertheless a lavish affair, both the bride and groom wearing white robes in honour of the Sun God. Again, cheering crowds turned out to wish the newlyweds well as they walked from the temple to the Citadel after the ceremony, Phraates in a nice gesture walking behind Eszter and holding a parasol over her head as a defence against the sun. Gallia walked beside him and behind them strolled Diana and Gafarn.

Eager crowds surged forward to get a closer look at the newlyweds, as well as the high king, Chrestus and his men ensuring they did not get within ten paces of the wedding party. Phraates was caught by surprise when the air was suddenly filled with red, purple, pink and white desert roses, thrown by well-wishers to create a carpet of petals in front of Eszter and Dalir. Unfortunately, many hit the couple, Phraates and Gallia. I was walking beside Claudia, behind Gafarn and Diana, and grinned when I saw the parasol momentarily waver.

'Phraates is unused to the love of the people.'

She gave a smirk. 'He finds such closeness to commoners disconcerting, though he will lap up the increase in popularity that comes with it.'

'He has changed.'

'Has he?' she retorted.

'I remember a cynical, malicious, pale young man surrounded by sycophants when I first met Phraates. In looks and mannerisms he is far removed from that individual.'

She laughed. 'Oh, father, after all these years you still look for the best in people. Like a drowning man clinging to a fragile piece of ballast, you latch on to the flimsiest evidence to support your hopes and dreams.'

'Phraates is the same as he ever was, father, though the rebellion of Tiridates and the desertion of so many of those he believed to be allies shook him to the core. For the moment he is malleable, vulnerable even. But it will not last.'

'And you decided to take advantage of his vulnerability.'

She looked disappointed. 'Naturally. Far better to have the Scythian Sisters influencing Phraates than men such as Timo and Ashleen, and let us not forget the sycophants Osrow and Dagan. No, the empire is in safer hands now.'

'How long will you remain at Ctesiphon as Phraates' adviser?'

‘Until you and mother die,’ she answered matter-of-factly, ‘then I will return to rule Dura.’

‘What?’

‘Now that Eszter is married, any sons she gives birth to will be the heir to Dura’s throne when you and mother have left this life.’

‘That is the custom.’

‘However, in return for saving his life, his reign and the empire,’ she said, ‘Phraates has pledged to support my elevation to Dura’s throne.’

‘You will not harm your sister or any children she might have,’ I told her sternly.

‘You think I would kill my own sister? I hope she and Dalir enjoy many happy years together. But Dalir is the son of Kalet, a glorified horse thief who would oversee the ruin of what you have built over four decades. I cannot allow that to happen and the empire cannot tolerate a weak Dura.’

‘What if I and your mother outlive you?’ I teased.

‘Then Dura’s future will be yours to safeguard. In your heart, you must know Eszter and Dalir will make poor rulers. At least at Ctesiphon I will be a part of trying to ensure the smooth running of the empire.’

I was unsure. ‘So Dura will be subject to the whims of the Scythian Sisters, for surely you take your orders from them rather than Phraates.’

We were nearing the Citadel now, the crowds having been ushered away by Chrestus’ men. As a result the streets were quiet and largely deserted, aside from a few curious onlookers peering at us from tiny first-floor balconies.

‘You are wrong, father. The sisters do not exercise control like some sort of secret society. They seek harmony within the empire, so a united Parthia can defeat external enemies. We serve the gods, good kings serve the gods, and in turn the gods give their support to those who respect and serve them.

‘Dura is high in the favour of Phraates and the gods.’

‘It is?’

‘You are too modest, father. You have lived an honourable and pious life. Few men can make such a boast.’

‘I do not make such a boast.’

‘My point exactly.’

The feast was a testament to the organisational skills of Ashk and Rsan; five hundred guests being fed a variety of different meat and fish dishes, washed down with an unending supply of wine and beer. For most the dishes were just food, but those of a more discerning

disposition would have recognised they had been carefully chosen to bless the union of Eszter and Dalir. The number seven is sacred and so the feast included the seven elements that were regarded as particularly auspicious. First was *sabzeh* – sprouted wheat, which symbolised rebirth. Next was *samanu*, a creamy sweet dish that was associated with affluence. The simple apple signified health and beauty, and garlic was incorporated for general good health. *Senjed* – fruit of the wild olive – symbolised love. *Sumac* spice encouraged fertility and, finally, vinegar symbolised health and beauty in old age.

Such symbolism was lost on Kalet and his lords, who got roaringly drunk, as did Dalir, Claudia catching my eye and frowning disapprovingly at her new brother-in-law. Dalir was brave and loved Eszter, but Claudia was right in believing he would make a poor king.

Phraates left Dura two days later in the company of Gafarn and Diana, the high king intent on visiting Hatra as part of his grand tour of the empire, or at least the western half of it. After Hatra he would be calling on King Silani in Persis, the former commander of his bodyguard now the ruler of one of the largest kingdoms in the empire. Life at Dura quickly returned to normal, though a letter from my brother was a cause for concern.

