

Chapter 1

I was glad Prince Phraates had not dallied at Dura. The sad fact was he was a pampered, loathsome boy who would grow into an amoral tyrant, of that I had no doubt. He had departed Dura the day before, a young stallion I had gifted him tied to the back of a wagon he travelled in. The sad truth was the prince could not ride a horse. He spent ten years in Roman captivity and during that time the sons of the Tiber had ensured he went nowhere near a horse. It was probably deliberate, the Romans knowing how much horse lore was integral to Parthian culture. I had never met or even known of a Parthian noble who could not ride a horse. Aside from cripples who could not physically haul themselves into the saddle, lords, princes and kings learned to ride before they could walk. Even in old age men of noble birth who had difficulty walking were helped into the saddle so they could ride. And now Parthia had a son of a king of kings who could not ride a horse. It was laughable at best and pathetic at worst. And this was the boy I had spent the last ten years fighting for, an ungrateful wretch who had no knowledge of Parthia's laws, customs or gods?

'It would have been better if Tiridates had strangled him instead of taking him to Syria and selling him to the Romans.'

Tiridates, the usurper who led an alliance of Parthia's eastern kings, who coveted the high crown of the empire, and who had captured Ctesiphon and the infant son of Phraates, had eventually come to grief on the battlefield outside the palace complex. But in that war I had lost Nergal, Praxima and Silaces and such a price was not worth paying for an ungrateful child.

'If there is one thing I despise it is ingratitude.'

I closed my eyes and leaned back against the stone griffin that stood above the Palmyrene Gate and kept watch over the city of Dura and the whole kingdom. I took comfort from the sounds coming from below. An exasperated duty centurion berating a merchant for gossiping with a fellow trader and allowing his camels to block the entrance. The laughter of children with their parents, the grunts of ill-tempered camels and the general hubbub surrounding the entrance to a thriving city. Then there were the smells that accompanied the noise. The exotic aroma of spices from the east, the earthy scent of camels, horses and mules, and the stink of their dung collected by city workers and thrown in the back of carts to be used as either manure or dried to be used as an alternative to firewood.

'When you are gone, they will carve a statue of you and put it beside the griffin so the two of you can be together for all eternity.'

I opened my eyes and saw a figure dressed in black, a black hood over her head to cover her face. She was standing a few paces from me, in full view of those approaching the city below. But I knew she was revealed only to me.

'I like it here; it is a place I can be on my own and reflect on things.'

'Why the long face, son of Hatra? All your dreams have come true, have they not? The Romans have their eagles, or at least faithful reproductions, Phraates has his son back and you have your peace with Rome.'

'He is a disappointment. The son of Phraates, I mean.'

She gave a mocking cackle.

'Of course he is. But what is that to you? He is still a boy and will not gain the high throne before you die, not unless he poisons his father, which he well might do, of course.'

My spirits sank further.

'Did you pay me a visit to cheer me up? Because if you did, I have to tell you it is not working.'

'Have you ever directed your thoughts to the notion of irony?'

'Irony?'

'It occurs to me, son of Hatra, that had it not been for your efforts, Phraates would have most likely abandoned his son to the Romans, raped a slave girl to get her pregnant and passed off the child as his own, after doing away with her after she gave birth. You will appreciate the irony.'

'That is just your opinion,' I told her.

She chuckled. 'I think it is more fact than opinion, but we are where we are and there is no use raking over the past.'

'He can't ride a horse,' I said.

'Who?'

'Prince Phraates, he cannot ride a horse.'

'So that's the reason for the sour face. I might have known it would be something trivial.'

'Trivial?' I said loudly. 'The son of the king of kings unable to ride a horse will reduce the empire to a laughing stock.'

She tutted. 'Instead of gazing lovingly at the desert, look below you, at all the people entering and leaving your city, along with their goods, livestock and families. I doubt most of them have even heard of the king of kings, let alone care that his son cannot ride a horse.'

'I know.'

‘Ah, now we come to it. The great King Pacorus, lord high general numerous times, victor over the Romans, Armenians, Kushans, Cappadocians, Galatians, Sarmatians and Pontic hill tribes – my apologies if I have left anyone out – is unhappy and so the whole world must atone for his ruffled feathers. Pathetic.’

She spat out the last word to indicate her mockery.

‘It is nothing to do with me, and I defeated the army of Pontus as well as the hill men of that country, but all to do with the empire.’

‘I feel sorry for Gallia,’ she said.

‘Gallia?’

‘Sometimes I think you are more married to the empire than your wife. Poor Gallia. It all goes back to you refusing the high crown, of course. I blame myself.’

‘What are you wittering on about?’

‘I told everyone who would listen that the king who had no crown would wear no crown,’ she replied. ‘Perhaps I was wrong, and you should have been high king.’

‘Now you tell me,’ I groaned.

‘But you would have made a bad high king, I think.’

‘What?’

She said nothing for a couple of minutes.

‘You are a just and fair king, a man known throughout the empire for his sense of honour and duty. As such, son of Hatra, you are totally unsuited to sit on the high throne, which requires duplicity, a scheming nature and, most importantly, a total disregard for human suffering. For how else can an empire of millions ruled by seventeen proud and prickly kings be kept together? Being unable to ride a horse pales beside such weighty responsibilities, I think.’

‘It is still important,’ I insisted.

‘What is more important is that there is a smooth transition of power between father and son when the former expires, either of natural causes or otherwise. That is, after all, what you have fought for your whole life, is it not?’

I nodded.

‘You look well, son of Hatra.’

‘I feel well.’

The great favour gifted me and Gallia by our daughter Claudia as head of the Scythian Sisters had made us both feel thirty years younger. The trip to the barren, inhospitable Alborz Mountains near the Caspian Sea far to the north had revived our bodies and minds. We had briefly stayed in a village in the heart of the mountains that was not of this earth and had

immersed ourselves in the settlement's cleansing pool, to emerge refreshed from the aches and pains that afflict many individuals in their autumn years. Claudia, and Dobbai, had given us a great gift, the greatest gift that can be bestowed on a mortal. For it reversed the process of time itself. How long it would last neither of us thought about and I did not enquire now. We woke each day healthy and strong and thanked the gods for such a blessing. And if it ended tomorrow, we would still be grateful to the immortal ones.

I looked across to the legionary camp half a mile from the Palmyrene Gate and then at a camel caravan making its way west to Palmyra, its camels taking silk to be sold in the *agora* of that city, which used to be a desert oasis. The silk would then be transported on to either Rome or Egypt.

'I'm worried about Claudia,' I said.

'A member of our order who resides at Ctesiphon and has the ear of the high king. What could possibly trouble you?'

'The slave woman who accompanied the high king's son, Musa. I was told she is dangerous.'

'Who told you?'

'Marcus Agrippa.'

'Not a Parthian I am familiar with.'

'He's not a Parthian, he's a Roman and was part of the delegation sent by Emperor Augustus to handle the exchange of the eagles for the son of Phraates.'

'Why would you trust the word of a Roman?'

'I trust Agrippa's word. He is a man of honour.'

She was dismissive of the idea.

'If you think a Scythian Sister is in danger from a slave girl you have been spending too much time in the sun without your head being covered. But rest assured if Claudia believes this Musa to be a threat of any kind, she will either have her killed or do it herself. You obviously have too much spare time on your hands, though not for much longer.'

'What does that mean?'

'You will see, son of Hatra, you will see.'

And then she was gone, and I was left alone atop the Palmyrene Gate. Dobbai was right, though. Since the exchange of the eagles for the young son of Phraates, a general peace had descended on the empire and I was forced to turn away from grand strategy and international politics to focus on running the Kingdom of Dura. But thanks to such loyal and diligent servants as Godarz, Rsan, Aaron and now Almas, the latest city governor, the kingdom largely ran itself.

It certainly did not need any radical changes, which begged the question: what would its king do now there was seemingly no one left to fight?

One of the more enjoyable activities of a king was rewarding his servants for their bravery on the battlefield. Despite my encounter with Dobbai I left the stone griffin in a good mood because there was a ceremony being held later in the Citadel that I was looking forward to. Navid had been a rising star in the army's corps of horse archers for a while now. He had formed part of the escort when I rode to Media to visit King Akmon and Queen Lusin, taking part in the defence of the village of my former squire Klietas against Aorsi raiders. He had subsequently been assigned to defend northern Media with three hundred Duran horse archers but had now returned to the kingdom. I honoured my pledge to Sporaces, the general of horse archers, to enrol Navid in the Sons of the Citadel scheme, which groomed the most promising young officers for high command. But the ceremony in the Citadel was not anything to do with the Sons of the Citadel but to promote Navid to deputy dragon commander.

It was an informal, low-key affair and not a surprise to Navid who had already been informed of his promotion by Sporaces. But it did give me a chance to present Navid with a specially made *spatha*, the sword issued to horsemen in the Roman army, and which was standard issue to Dura's horse archers. It was a direct copy of my own *spatha* that had been presented to me in Italy by the slave leader Spartacus all those years ago. Simple in design and appearance, the *spatha* effortlessly combined balance with striking power. Its overall length was three feet with the blade being just over two feet, the sword's total weight being a mere two pounds. The simple hilt was walnut soaked in linseed oil for two days to seal the wood against moisture, before being given an eight-sided cross-section with finger grooves for ease of handling. The armourers had carved Navid's name on the blade to personalise the weapon, its leather scabbard being decorated with silver griffins. Now Gallia presented it to him.

My wife was dressed in a white silk dress with a thin silver belt around her slim waist and a sparkling silver diadem on her head. I too wore a diadem, like hers fashioned by the rogue Bighthan, may Shamash watch over him wherever he is. Despite Dobbai's prophecy the diadem was a crown of sorts, though strictly speaking it was the headgear of satraps rather than kings or emperors. Like many things in Parthia diadems were originally from Greece, being at first ornamental bands made from gold sheet worn around the head. They became associated with kingship and divine monarchy when Alexander of Macedon, the conqueror of the world, wore one, and they thereafter became highly regarded. I thought them ostentatious but was persuaded to wear one during the negotiations with the Romans at Palmyra.

My own diadem comprised two pieces of narrow sheet gold fastened to a round gold disc at the front and secured by two loops at the back. The circle at the front carried an image of a sun disc in honour of Shamash, the Sun God, and the sides were decorated with sitting griffins. Gallia's diadem was identical but in silver, Bigthan having surpassed himself to fashion such beautiful items. It was a beautiful day, Shamash ensuring the sun shone down on the terrace where the army's senior commanders gathered to celebrate Navid's promotion. There was the shaven-headed, muscular Chrestus, general of the whole army, the powerfully built Azad, commander of cataphracts, and the tall and sinewy Sporaces, the commander of horse archers. Both sported beards unlike Chrestus who kept his head and face free of growth in honour of Lucius Domitus, the first commander of Dura's army.

'You have shaved your beard!'

Something about Navid's appearance had been bothering me when he had first appeared on the palace terrace with Sporaces, and the drachma suddenly dropped. Navid had previously sported a wispy beard but even with facial growth his appearance was slightly boyish. Now he looked like a teenager, though he was in his mid-twenties. He had the classic physique of a horse archer: tall and lean erring on the side of gauntness.

'Yes, majesty, my beard refused to grow anymore, so I decided to cut it off.'

'And why not?' I said, stroking my own stubble-free chin.

He clutched the sword to his chest and smiled lovingly at a middle-aged woman standing beside the balustrade, who smiled back at him.

'Your mother, Navid?'

'Yes, majesty.'

'Go and speak to her, Pacorus,' said Gallia. 'Come, Navid, let us get out of the sun.'

She gently gripped his elbow and ushered him towards the large awning providing shade for the chairs and tables holding refreshments. I walked over to the balustrade. Navid's mother bowed her head to me. I placed my hands on the smooth stone and looked across the Euphrates below, to where a camel caravan was making its way towards the pontoon bridges over the river.

'You must be very proud.'

'I am, majesty, thank you.'

'I am forgetting my manners. May I know your name?'

She had large brown eyes and olive skin; her head was covered with a green shawl.

'Minerva, majesty.'

'Well, Minerva, I am very pleased with your son, who has shown himself wise beyond his years. I have no doubt he will one day lead Dura's corps of horse archers.'

'His father would have been proud,' she sighed.

I looked around but saw no other unfamiliar faces on the terrace.

'He too was a horse archer, majesty. He fell at Phraaspa.'

My mind went back to a campaign conducted in a freezing winter in northern Parthia against Mark Antony and his legions. It was over ten years ago but some scars never heal. I saw the pain in Minerva's eyes.

'I am sorry for your loss.'

She smiled at me. 'Navid's father loved being a part of Dura's army, majesty, and thanks to your generosity we did not starve in the aftermath of his death.'

'My generosity?'

'The widow's pension paid to all those whose husbands do not return from the wars, majesty. It kept a roof over our head and food in our bellies until Navid was able to take his place in the ranks.'

I looked across the terrace to where Gallia was charming the new deputy dragon commander, around them servants filling the goblets of Dura's senior commanders.

'Did he ever want to be anything else, besides a horse archer, I mean?'

She shook her head. 'No, majesty. If anything, his father's death made him more determined to follow in his footsteps.'

'I am glad that he did so, as is General Sporaces. Let us take advantage of the shade.'

We walked over to her son and joined the conversation. It was a pleasant afternoon and Mascius, former slave, palace scholar, trainee to Ashk, the palace steward, and my private secretary, never let the conversation flag. He too had a clean-shaven face, his thick mop of curly black hair immaculately groomed and oiled in the style of a wealthy noble. He dressed like an aristocrat as well, with soft leather shoes, a white silk tunic and red leather belt around his waist. He looked like a visiting prince rather than a palace servant, but then his former owners had dressed him in expensive clothes, and I saw no reason why the practice should not continue. But he did retain vestiges of his former status, such as addressing the fearsome Chrestus as 'master' when speaking to him, which pleased the general enormously.

Mascius poured more wine into Navid's goblet after topping up Gallia's.

'You will be Dura's equivalent of Prince Paris, I am sure,' he told Navid.

'I am unfamiliar with the name,' Navid told him.

'Prince Paris was the son of King Priam of Troy,' beamed Mascius.

'The gods preserve us,' groaned Chrestus.

‘He killed the Greek hero Achilles during the Trojan War,’ continued Mascius, ‘by shooting an arrow through his heel, hence the saying Achilles’ Heel.’

‘Mascius is very knowledgeable about Greek history and indeed history in general,’ I said.

‘Obviously a myth,’ opined Sporaces. ‘To hit the heel of an enemy with an arrow during a battle is all but impossible.’

‘Quite so, general,’ agreed Mascius, ‘but Prince Paris’ arrow was guided by Apollo, the Greek god of archery.’

‘So, this Paris was not such an accomplished archer after all,’ said Chrestus. ‘Seems a bit of an idiot to me, aiming at a heel when he had the rest of the body to shoot at.’

Mascius remained calm.

‘Achilles was the son of Peleus, a Greek king, and Thetis, a sea nymph,’ explained Mascius. ‘Thetis was immortal but gave birth to a mortal son, who she tried to make immortal by dipping him in the Styx, the river that runs through the underworld, holding him by his heel. Thus did Achilles become immortal, apart from the heel by which Thetis held him by, and which ultimately cost him his life.’

‘I’m surprised the king and queen tolerate your ramblings,’ mocked Chrestus.

‘That’s no way to talk to a veteran,’ I told Chrestus.

They all looked at Mascius in astonishment, this man whose appearance and demeanour suggested he had never seen a spear in his life, let alone handled one. I wagged a finger at them, Navid included.

‘Mascius stood beside me on the pontoon bridge at Assur when we fought the Sarmatians, and it was his plan to use a cart as a battering ram that saved all our lives. And the moral of the story?’

‘Don’t get isolated on a bridge surrounded by the enemy,’ sniffed Chrestus.

‘Appearances can be deceptive,’ I said.

It was a most enjoyable afternoon and we wished Navid and his mother a fond farewell when it was time for them to depart. I was immensely proud of him, and all of Dura’s soldiers, who had helped to carve out a great kingdom from barren desert. That evening I could not sleep, staring up at the ceiling and eventually getting out of the bed and opening the shuttered doors of our bedroom to allow the moonlight to flood in. Gallia rubbed her eyes and sat up.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘I was just thinking about pensions.’

‘Pensions?’

‘Yes. Had it not been for the fact Dura pays its war widows a pension, Navid might have ended up a beggar on the streets, or worse.’

‘Worse?’

I shuddered. ‘A catamite or something similar. As it is, he is earmarked for high command. I have to say it gives me immense pride to think of the measures we have put in place to allow individuals to rise from the poverty that affects so many. So they can rise in the world due to their merit rather than their wealth or position.’

‘And you woke me to tell me this as opposed to waiting until the morning?’

I walked from the bedroom on to the small balcony, below which was a sheer drop to the Euphrates below the escarpment on which the Citadel sat. I looked to the eastern sky to see faint hues of red and purple.

‘It *is* morning. Of course, I cannot take the credit.’

‘For...?’

‘Dura’s pensions system. It was put in place by Godarz all those years ago.’

Gallia rose and walked over to stand beside me. I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her on the lips.

‘Dear Godarz,’ she sighed, ‘I think of him often.’

A Parthian who had been captured by the Romans before I fell into their hands, he had joined the slave army of Spartacus and afterwards travelled back to Parthia with me and the rest of the Companions. I had installed him as governor of Dura when Sinatruces had gifted me the city and kingdom, though it was a poison chalice at the time. The years Godarz had spent among the Romans had not been wasted and he introduced a pension scheme for army veterans and the widows of those soldiers killed in battle. It was an expensive system but Dura being on the Silk Road, thanks to the deal I had brokered with Haytham, King of the Agraci, it meant the kingdom could afford it. And if it continued to produce soldiers such as Navid then it had more than paid for itself.

‘I still miss him. Him and all of those we have lost over the years.’

She rested her head on my shoulder.

‘As do I.’

‘I was also thinking of Alcaeus.’

‘You have been doing a lot of thinking lately.’

I placed an arm around her waist.

‘It comes from having no wars to fight. I suppose we should invite him and his pregnant girlfriend to the palace, seeing as we agreed to be the child’s guardians when it is born.’

‘When *you* agreed to us becoming its guardians.’

‘You disagree with my decision?’

She gave a deep sigh. ‘I love Alcaeus but what was he thinking, becoming involved with a much younger woman?’

‘I can think of one or two things,’ I grinned.

She jabbed me in the ribs with a finger.

‘Lust for younger women is the doom of many men. Look what happened to Mark Antony and his lusting after Cleopatra.’

‘Hopefully the woman of Alcaeus is not like the late Queen of Egypt. But we should invite her and our friend to the palace sooner rather than later.’

‘Then make it as soon as possible, Pacorus. I have a feeling it will be an ordeal.’

Gallia had always been perceptive, and the meal Ashk arranged in the palace for our old friend and his new woman became a case study in awkwardness. I had suggested to Ashk that the meal should be a modest affair so as not to overawe Alcaeus’ love and make her feel uncomfortable. So, the fare was basic: chicken, fish, rice, cheese, bread and figs served with wine. Rather than dining in the banqueting hall I had the food served on the terrace to create a more intimate environment, which in hindsight was a mistake.

Her name was Vida, which meant ‘visible’, and she certainly lived up to her name. She was tall and slender or would have been had it have not been for the very visible bump in her belly – the future child of the wiry haired Greek who had been our friend for over forty years. He was old, grey, and possessed of leathery skin, but had a sparkle in his eyes; Vida was young and beautiful with a flawless complexion. Gallia and I purposely dressed modestly, which meant no diadems, gold jewellery or shimmering cuirasses. Gallia wore a simple white linen dress to complement my white linen shirt and purposely omitted her gold and silver armlets, earrings and rings. Vida, in stark contrast, looked like a visiting queen when Ashk showed her and Alcaeus on to the terrace.

Her white silk dress was loose to accommodate her swollen belly, but her slender arms were not covered to show off the silver armlets she was wearing. She wore silver earrings and a silver diadem around her head. There were also slivers of silver in her long black hair that cascaded down her back. She made a striking first impression, but I could see the disappointment in her large, lustrous eyes when Alcaeus introduced her to the King and Queen of Dura. She bowed her head in a perfunctory manner but when she was shown to her chair, I could sense she was underwhelmed by the whole experience.

‘Welcome Vida,’ I smiled, nodding to Ashk to serve wine.

Alcaeus beamed at us. 'Gallia, Pacorus.'

Alcaeus, by comparison, was all smiles and good cheer as he embraced me and Gallia, kissing the queen on the cheek. Vida was surprised by the familiarity between rulers and one of their subjects. Alcaeus had not revealed to her that Companions were always on first-name terms with one another, regardless of rank. For his part our Greek friend was obviously besotted with the woman who was at least a third his age, gazing lovingly into her eyes as Gallia and I conversed with her.

'You are a native of Dura, Vida?' I asked.

'Yes, majesty.'

'You live with your parents?' enquired Gallia.

Vida reached over to grab Alcaeus' arm. 'Not anymore.'

'Our child will be born in our own home.'

Gallia's eyes narrowed. 'In your large, well-appointed mansion, you mean.'

Alcaeus was not listening. 'Such a large house should be filled with children's laughter. You must come and visit us and be our guests. It has been too long since my house had guests.'

So, we visited his mansion a short distance from the Citadel two days later. The home of Alcaeus was a place of marble-tiled floors, well-tended gardens, corridors filled with busts of Greek philosophers and a magnificent library. This time we dressed in the traditional attire of Parthian monarchs, Gallia insisting we wear our diadems and silk robes, which I found ostentatious but was appreciated by Vida, who was delighted we arrived with an armed guard that kept watch on the mansion while we ate in an intimate room filled with couches and scented candles.

Vida rubbed her belly. 'This will be our first child, my love. We will have many children.'

Gallia looked at me and laughed, causing Alcaeus to frown.

'What is so funny?'

'I mean, really, Alcaeus? How likely is it you will father any more children?' the queen asked. 'None of us are getting any younger.'

Vida began to cry, causing Alcaeus to become distraught. He left his couch to cradle the woman who had stolen his heart, and as far as Gallia was concerned was in the process of stealing his mansion and fortune, a not inconsiderable fortune. Our Greek friend had led an abstemious life, had always dressed modestly and had never indulged in excess, which meant he had accrued a considerable amount of money in his role as the commander of the army's medical corps and afterwards being paid a generous pension by the royal treasury. He used a cloth to wipe away Vida's tears.

‘Really, Gallia, sometimes you can be terse to the point of rudeness. You are not on the battlefield now.’

‘It needed to be said,’ retorted my wife as I stared into my wine, a feeling of acute embarrassment enveloping me.

Alcaeus rounded on her.

‘Did it! I am not in the army now and am free to live my life the way I see fit. The days when the Queen of Dura gave me orders are long gone.’

Gallia was genuinely hurt.

‘We are Companions, and I never gave you orders. We are friends. Have you forgotten when we were in Italy?’

Alcaeus kissed Vida gently on the forehead before returning to his couch.

‘I have not, Gallia. But have you? I remember being in an army led by an individual who paid no heed to a person’s status or race, where all were equal and were given positions according to merit. I wonder what Spartacus would say about the opulence, greed and corruption of Ctesiphon and similar palaces throughout the Parthian Empire? Which you both have fought to preserve.’

‘We did what we had to do to preserve the empire,’ I said. ‘But if you are asking if I approve of the vices of Ctesiphon and other places, then I can tell you in all honesty I do not.’

‘Neither do I,’ added Gallia.

Alcaeus stared into the distance.

‘We have lost our way, Pacorus. I saw Phraates when he visited Dura and could not believe the pampered peacock is the son of Orodes and Axsen. He is clearly mad and thinks himself a god, and now thanks to your efforts he is free to indulge his insanity.’

‘You think I should have allowed the Romans to win?’ I asked him.

‘I think you should have become high king all those years ago, Pacorus, and then Parthia might have become the place we all hoped it would become.’

His head dropped. ‘As it is...’

‘Why talk of the past when we have our future to look forward to, my love?’ said Vida softly.

He looked at her and smiled. His eyes went to Gallia and his smile disappeared.

‘I am not a fool, Gallia. I know I will not live to see Vida’s hair turn grey. Perhaps I might drop dead tomorrow.’

‘Do not say that!’ shrieked Vida.

‘But you and our child will live,’ he told Vida. ‘And Pacorus and Gallia have pledged to be its guardians should anything happen to us.’

‘But they are old,’ said Vida innocently.

Gallia was mortified but I erupted in laughter.

‘Don’t worry, Vida, when we are gone my daughter will rule Dura and she will watch over you and your child, or children.’

‘You will be privileged to be in the care of one of the Scythian Sisters,’ said Gallia, a trace of warning in her voice.

‘Who are they?’ asked Vita, cradling her baby bump.

‘Practitioners of the dark arts,’ muttered Alcaeus who drained his cup and refilled it. ‘Is Claudia a suitable person to entrust your kingdom to, Pacorus?’

‘The kingdom will be safe in her hands, Alcaeus,’ I told him. ‘But why talk of politics and corruption? I’m sure Vida is bored by such discourse. What name have you in mind for the child when it arrives?’

‘Alcaeus wants Zeno if it is a boy,’ replied Vida.

‘The name of the founder of the stoic school in Athens three hundred years ago,’ smiled Alcaeus, ‘a man of virtue who lived a simple and good life.’

I looked at Vida reclining on her couch, dressed in finery, expensive rings on her fingers, her hair oiled, gold earrings complementing the gold torc around her neck. She had left a simple life and I doubted she wished to return to one. Alas for the dreams of Alcaeus.

With our host slipping into a melancholy alcoholic stupor and his pregnant young lover clearly bored, we made our excuses and left the mansion early, half a dozen Exiles escorting us the short distance to the Citadel. Gallia was barely out of the mansion’s gates when she began expressing her views.

‘That woman is a viper who will bleed Alcaeus dry.’

‘I think vipers inject poison rather than chew their prey,’ I opined.

‘Don’t be clever, Pacorus, I am not in the mood.’

The legionaries around us stared straight ahead, their centurion commander in front with a white transverse crest atop his helmet.

‘And did you see the amount of jewellery she was wearing?’ exclaimed Gallia. ‘She is already eating into Alcaeus’ money. That is all she is after, you know, his money. Conniving little rodent. What was he thinking?’

‘He seems happy,’ I shrugged.

Gallia stopped and faced me. The soldiers immediately halted.

‘Happy? Happy? She will spend all the money he has and after she has used him, she will toss him aside.’

I took her arm and we recommenced our stroll back to the Citadel. It was late and the streets were empty and quiet. They were patrolled nightly by groups of Durans and Exiles to ensure the creatures of the night – thieves, robbers and whores – did not trouble decent citizens in their beds. I liked to think Dura was a safe city but it was also prosperous and money always attracts the more unsavoury elements of society. The law courts were never unemployed, a steady stream of ne’er-do-wells being brought before magistrates to be judged for their misdemeanours. Many were flogged, others were branded and not a few were executed. Many mistook the missing hand of Governor Almas for a weak administrator, but he ruled the city with a great firmness, which was greatly appreciated by rich and poor alike.

‘Do you resent his happiness, Gallia?’

‘He is making a fool of himself.’

‘He has earned that right. I see a man who used to live alone in a big mansion deliriously happy he has found someone to share his autumn years with. And if she spends all his money, so be it.’

She was appalled. ‘Surely you cannot mean that.’

‘During our time in their company tonight I kept thinking about Rsan.’

‘Rsan?’

We were approaching the gates to the Citadel, which were closed.

‘King and queen approaching,’ shouted the centurion, prompting them to slowly open.

‘Rsan also lived a big mansion, which is now shuttered and empty. Well, apart from the servants I pay to keep it from falling into disrepair,’ I said. ‘I like to think he had a happy life but what if he too longed for a companion, someone to share his life with?’

‘He never gave any indication of such a desire.’

‘To us, no. But in his quiet moments, when he lay alone in bed at night, what is to say he regretted not having found someone to share his life with?’

‘You are in a melancholy mood tonight,’ she said.

We walked through the open gates, the duty centurion standing in front of a line of Exiles snapping to attention, his men doing likewise as we passed. The gates were closed behind us.

‘I have seen too much death and misery in my life,’ I told her, ‘which is why I give thanks to Shamash for that young woman and the child growing inside her, even if she is a money grabber. Alcaeus will not live forever, none of us will, so what does it matter if Vida inherits his wealth and property? I don’t want her harmed.’

Gallia was shocked. 'Who would harm her?'

We walked across the courtyard to the palace steps, our escort still flanking us to ensure we reached our living quarters safely.

'I know how it works. You mention Vida to Minu and word gets back to the Sanctuary that the queen is unhappy, and the next thing a pregnant woman has miscarried. Well, I forbid it.'

'What is the matter with you?' she asked. 'Do you really think I would have a hand in the murder of an unborn child?'

'What? No, of course not, I apologise. Alcaeus is one of our oldest friends, a group that is growing smaller by the year. I want him to be happy, that is all.'

'So do I. I just do not want him to be humiliated.'

We had walked up the steps into the portico, guards at the pillars snapping to attention. The commander of our escort halted his men and saluted.

'Thank you, centurion,' I said, 'you and your men are dismissed.'

We walked through a silent palace, oil lamps illuminating the throne room and the corridors behind it leading to our bedroom. The other rooms were empty, Eszter having taken herself off to her desert mansion complete with its own oasis, along with her Agraci bodyguard. Despite her declaration of wishing to live with us in the palace, she had found the atmosphere in Dura oppressive after living a life of freedom in the desert, away from prying eyes. Rumour reached us that she had taken up with her Agraci lover again in the aftermath of Dalir's death. Did I blame her? No. My only regret for her was that she was now probably too old to have children.

'Drinking too much wine always makes you morose,' were Gallia's parting words before we fell asleep.

