

[Chapter 1](#)

I always relished returning to Dura, no more so than when I had been the guest of King of Kings Phraates at the gilded cage of Ctesiphon. Compared to the shimmering palace of the high king, Dura was a poor relation, a city of stone, mud-brick and a distinct absence of marble and gold. But whereas Ctesiphon's white-faced walls enclosed a population of slaves, pampered nobles and their wives, an army of priests, many temples, eunuchs and soldiers who resembled strutting peacocks, all living among an excess of marble, gold, silver and ivory, Dura was a physical manifestation of military strength.

The city could only be assailed from the western side since there were wadis beyond its northern and southern walls, and it would take an army of rock climbers to reach the Citadel perched atop an escarpment on its eastern side. There was a sliver of flat land between the near-vertical escarpment and the River Euphrates, which was not fordable at Dura. Instead, there were two wooden pontoon bridges just north of the city to allow the camel caravans carrying silk to Roman Syria and Egypt to cross the waterway. There was also a stone bridge further north, built by the Greeks generations before, now seldom used and more a mute reminder of when Greeks ruled the civilised world.

Beyond the city's Palmyrene Gate lay the great legionary camp where the gold griffin and silver lion standards of the Durans and Exiles resided, plus the famed Staff of Victory decorated with silver discs depicting the many victories of Dura's army over the decades. Immediately north of the city was the caravan park, created to provide accommodation for the great camel trains that criss-crossed the empire without interruption. They were Dura's lifeblood, enabling the kingdom to raise and maintain a standing army of cataphracts, horse archers and two legions based on their Roman counterparts but Parthian to the core.

I am old now, some would say a relic of a bygone age when Parthia was drenched with blood and perpetual war ravaged the empire. Some mornings, when my leg and back ached with fury, I would agree with them. Parthia is different now, an empire once again ruled by an uncontested high king and supported by the monarchs of the seventeen kingdoms that make up a realm stretching for a thousand miles from the Euphrates in the west to the Himalayas in the east. They were loyal servants of the man who sat on Ctesiphon's golden throne. Mostly.

Like an old grumbling volcano, minor eruptions still occurred to remind everyone that Parthia is not an earthly paradise free from strife. The gods sent these tremors to illustrate the frailty of peace and happiness and the need to remain vigilant against both internal and external threats. That is why Dura's army existed and why it would never be disbanded, at least not while

I still had a heartbeat. The cost was exorbitant, of course, not only in maintaining a standing army of ten thousand foot soldiers, a thousand cataphracts and five thousand horse archers, but also the logistics to support those troops. The gruff Farid, the commander of the camel corps, which was so essential for providing the horse archers with a constant supply of ammunition on the battlefield, had fifteen hundred beasts at his disposal, each one requiring a driver capable of controlling his animal in the chaos of battle. Civilian drivers were also required for the dozens of carts used by the legions, and then there were the hundreds of mules that supported the Durans and Exiles when on campaign. In addition, there were the two thousand squires, two for each cataphract, who attended to the needs of their masters and trained for the day when they would don the scale armour and full-face helmets of Dura's cataphracts. When they would also take possession of the fabled *ukku* swords, the black-bladed weapons that could cut through steel and yet were as light as a feather. Dura's army had an aura of invincibility and a reputation second to none. But maintaining a legend was prohibitively expensive.

Over the years Dura's army had covered itself with glory, and for that I gave thanks daily to Shamash, Lord of the Sun. But parallel to the battlefield success was an equally impressive triumph, for south of the city and covering a distance of around two hundred and fifty miles, was a green carpet extending inland from the Euphrates and farmed by thousands of the kingdom's citizens. When I had first come to Dura that land was literally desert, a parched ground of dust, stones, vipers and scorpions. Then there had been open warfare between the lords and residents of Dura and the Agraci, the fearsome desert raiders who operated from the great oasis of Palmyra. But I had brokered a peace between Dura and Haytham, the cold, calculating leader of the Agraci, and the desert had bloomed as a result. The trade caravans crossed the Euphrates at Dura and passed through Palmyra on their way to Syria, Judea and Egypt. Haytham grew rich, Dura grew rich and I used those riches to create and maintain a standing army. Now the people of Dura and the Agraci took peace for granted and only a dwindling band remembered when there had been open warfare between the two.

I slid off Horns in the Citadel's courtyard, a young lad rushing forward to take his reins and lead him to his stable. Normally, I would have taken him there myself to unsaddle him and rub him down, just as my horse archer escort was doing to their mounts. But I was much older than them and their king, so was allowed a few concessions. I stroked Horns' black neck.

'Treat him well, he deserves it.'

The lad bowed his head. 'I will, majesty.'

'Welcome back, majesty.'

Ashk, my chief steward, rushed down the steps leading to the palace, bowing his head when he stopped in front of me.

‘Any news?’

‘Nothing of importance, majesty, though three of the kitchen staff have been struck down by a mysterious illness. I have ordered a new batch of oil lamps to replace those in the corridor leading to the bedrooms in the private quarters, and...’

I held up a hand. ‘I meant anything concerning the safety or otherwise of the kingdom, Ashk.’

‘Nothing of import, majesty, though you did receive...’

He was cut short by the appearance of Gallia bounding down the steps. I opened my arms and we embraced. It was not a display of courtly protocol but as most of Parthia believed the Kingdom of Dura was the abode of barbarians, loose morals and a savage king and queen, what did it matter? She stepped back and looked me up and down.

‘I would have expected to see a Persian satrap before me, all silk, gold and ringlets in your oiled hair. Did the lord high general not find Ctesiphon to his liking?’

‘I am no longer lord high general,’ I groaned, ‘but Phraates’ chief negotiator.’

‘I know,’ she smiled, ‘Claudia has kept me fully abreast of developments.’

‘Let’s get out of this sun.’

We walked up the steps to the entrance to the palace, guards by the pillars snapping to attention as we passed to enter the relative cool of the shaded porch.

‘I trust Phraates is as annoying as ever,’ she said.

I nodded. ‘His new toy is a chariot and before I left he was trying to convince me to get one.’

She laughed. ‘A chariot?’

‘It is the latest thing, apparently.’

Gallia was happy and carefree, her long blonde hair loose and falling to her shoulders, skipping through the porch into the throne room, a mischievous glint in her blue eyes.

‘I don’t have a chariot for you but there is a present of sorts waiting for you on the terrace.’

I was intrigued. ‘A present?’

‘Bring refreshments to the terrace, Ashk,’ Gallia commanded, the chief steward trailing after us like a dutiful dog. He stopped and scurried off.

On the wall behind our thrones was my griffin standard, pristine and looking barely a day old. Guards flanked the dais and stood at the entrance to the chamber. Their eyes followed me

and Gallia but they made no movements, but all had a hand on their javelins, ready to spear anyone who dared to make off with the sacred cloth. I stared up at the flag.

‘Phraates wants me to oversee the negotiations with the Romans regarding the exchange of their captured eagles for his son. On the way back here I was thinking of Dobbai’s words when she sent the banner to me at Hatra. Do you remember?’

‘Like it was yesterday.’

I was taken back to the grand throne room in Hatra’s great palace and the quizzical looks on the faces of my mother and father when the banner arrived at their city, may Shamash keep their souls safe in heaven. I said aloud the words Dobbai had written in her letter to me all those years ago.

‘The griffin makes his nest on the high peaks, overlooking his kingdom, safe from his enemies. He has the head and front talons of an eagle and this is appropriate, for your destiny is entwined with the eagles of Rome. You fight them but they are a part of you.’

I sighed and turned away from the banner. ‘How right she was.’

‘She had the gift of foresight and was beloved of the gods, Pacorus.’

I thought of the sharp-tongued old hag in rags who treated kings and commoners alike with disdain. She was slight of build but possessed such force of personality she could reduce even the greatest warrior king to silence. The gods often choose the most inappropriate vessels to do their great work.

She grabbed my hand. ‘Come, no more talk of Romans or eagles.’

We walked through the door at the rear of the chamber leading to the palace’s private quarters, servants bowing their heads as we walked along the corridor to access the terrace. I squinted as I walked out into the bright sunshine, making my way to the wicker chairs stuffed with cushions beneath a large awning to provide shade. I did not at first spot an individual loitering near the stone balustrade, assuming it was a servant. I eased myself into a chair and stretched out my legs, glad to relax after a morning spent in the saddle. It was early spring and although already warm, it was far from the furnace of a Mesopotamian summer. There was also a light breeze blowing from the east.

‘Behold your present, Pacorus,’ said Gallia, beckoning the servant forward.

I looked up and was astounded, jumping to my feet.

‘Mascius!’

It was the slave who had been sent by his mistress to fight on the pontoon bridge across the Tigris at Assur, when it was attacked by a large force of Sarmatians. Mascius was the tutor to his owners’ children, being well versed in reading, writing, poetry and music. Dressed in expensive

clothes, wholly unsuited to battle, he had actually acquitted himself well and his intelligence had saved us from certain death on that wooden bridge. And now here he was, his thick mop of curly black hair well-groomed and his expensive clothes more suited to Ctesiphon than Dura.

He smiled, revealing a row of perfect white teeth and bowed to me.

‘It is good to see you again. Take a seat.’

A look of confusion spread across his handsome face.

‘Mascius was sent by his owners to you, Pacorus,’ said Gallia, ‘in thanks for your saving the city of Assur last year. In their covering letter Mascius’ master hopes you can find a use for such, to use his own words, “a diligent and hard-working slave”.’

I could hear the contempt in her voice and knew she was appalled Mascius had been sent to Dura like a prize bull or mere trinket. But such was the institution of slavery, which was firmly established throughout the known world.

‘You are a slave no longer, Mascius,’ I told him, ‘so please sit down. When did you arrive in Dura?’

‘Two days ago, highborn,’ he said, stepping into the shade under the awning but reluctant to sit himself down.

‘Sit down,’ commanded Gallia, which had the desired effect.

Ashk appeared at the head of a line of servants carrying fruit juice, wine, pastries, sweet meats, bread, olives, yoghurt and cheese. They placed the dishes on a low table between my and Gallia’s chairs, Ashk frowning in disapproval at the slave from Assur sitting with his king and queen. He poured wine into a silver rhyton and handed it to me, then serving Gallia while ignoring Mascius.

‘You are forgetting our guest, Ashk,’ I said.

‘Guest, majesty?’

‘I do not want Dura getting a reputation for inhospitality, Ashk. Please serve our guest some wine.’

He could not bring himself to pour the wine himself so ordered one of the servants to do so, bowing to me and Gallia.

‘You may leave us,’ I told him.

‘Do you wish me to bring some guards on to the terrace, majesty?’ he enquired.

‘Why, do you fear assassins might try to scale the escarpment and kill us while we are eating these delicious delicacies?’

He looked directly at Mascius. ‘No, majesty, but...’

‘Mascius saved our lives on the bridge outside Assur, Ashk. I doubt he harbours any notion of killing us. Besides, the spilling of blood would spoil that fine white silk tunic he is wearing.’

With a great deal of reluctance, Ashk took his leave, two of the servants remaining to serve wine and juice. I raised my rhyton to Mascius.

‘To your freedom.’

Gallia likewise toasted his liberty but Mascius appeared deflated.

‘You do not seem happy to be free,’ said Gallia.

‘I am grateful majesty, truly,’ he replied, ‘but what shall I do?’

It was not ingratitude but uncertainty concerning his immediate future that dulled any joy he may have been feeling. All his life he had been a slave, and he was fortunate to have lived in the house of a wealthy family where he had been educated, dressed in fine clothes and where he did not have to concern himself with where his next meal would come from. Trusted with the children of his master, he would have enjoyed a degree of freedom and indeed would have been regarded as a member of the family, though more like a loyal hound rather than a person. It was indicative of how his owners viewed him that they could cast him out of their home on a whim, to be sent to Dura as a gift for its king.

‘You shall become familiar with the workings of government,’ I reassured him. ‘You will live here in the palace and study the flesh and bones of the Kingdom of Dura. You will also accompany me from time to time when I venture outside the kingdom.’

Now his face lit up. ‘You honour me, highborn.’

‘I would prefer you call me “majesty”, Mascius,’ I said.

‘The gods smile on you,’ Gallia told him.

‘You worship the gods, Mascius?’ I asked him.

‘Yes, majesty, Nabu in particular.’

Nabu was the God of Wisdom, Writing and Learning, a Babylonian deity. It made perfect sense for a scholar such as Mascius to pray to him. The immortal had smiled on him thus far in his life, laying aside his servile status, and hopefully would continue to do so while under my protection.

‘To begin with, Ashk will familiarise you with palace protocols and routines,’ I said, ‘and when I go to meet the Romans, you will come with me. Have you ever met a Roman, Mascius?’

‘No, majesty.’

‘They are a petty minded people,’ said Gallia, ‘who are obsessed with trying to conquer the whole world.’

‘The queen does not like Romans, Mascius,’ I told him.

‘And when you have the misfortune to meet them, you will dislike them, too,’ Gallia told him.

I could have made Mascius my squire, but he was too intelligent to spend his days polishing my boots and cleaning my armour. Besides, I hoped, notwithstanding the recent war against the Sarmatians, I would no longer be embarking on military campaigns. I was determined to maintain my status of retirement, and though I did not relish the upcoming negotiations with the Romans, that they were taking place indicated peace with Rome was now becoming permanent. I gave thanks to Shamash every day for such a miracle.

I invited Mascius to the first weekly council meeting I attended in the Headquarters Building after my return from Ctesiphon. If he was disappointed that the hero of the recent war against the Sarmatians sat round a modest-sized table in a purely functional building to discuss the affairs of the kingdom, he did not say so. He did take a keen interest in everything that was spoken, though, and registered surprise Gallia was present.

Chrestus, the commander of the army, pointed at him.

‘I recognise you, though I cannot place you.’

Mascius stood and bowed his head.

‘You are correct, highborn. I fought beside King Pacorus on the bridge at Assur against the Sarmatians.’

Almas, deputy-governor seated beside Rsan, stared in wonder at Mascius.

‘You fought?’

‘Yes, highborn,’ smiled Mascius, taking note of the stump where Almas’ left hand should have been.

The crop-haired Chrestus nodded his head.

‘I remember you now. You were the one arguing with Kewab about some boring book.’

‘Sit down Mascius,’ I told him. ‘Mascius is studying the workings of all aspects of government, so that one day he may become a valuable member of the kingdom. I invited him here so he can familiarise himself with the workings of the council.’

‘They are simple enough,’ said Chrestus. ‘I make demands on behalf of the army and Treasurer Aaron here ensures it receives the money to meet those demands.’

Aaron, the elderly Jew who had been with me for thirty years, took a sharp intake of breath. Deputy Treasurer Ira, and a fellow Jew with grey-green eyes and sharp features, frowned disapprovingly.

‘The general over-simplifies things greatly, Mascius,’ said Aaron. ‘Like all soldiers, he has a blinkered view when it comes to the intricacies of finance.’

‘Indeed,’ agreed his deputy.

‘Without the army,’ growled Chrestus, ‘there would be no kingdom and therefore no finance.’

‘Much like the chicken-and-egg paradox,’ said Mascius without thinking. He immediately blushed when everyone looked at him.

‘Please accept my sincere apologies,’ he said.

‘Explain,’ ordered Gallia.

Mascius started to rise but I indicated he should remain seated. He cleared his throat.

‘The paradox begins with two premises. First, all chickens are hatched from eggs. Second, all chicken eggs are laid by chickens. But if we go back to the very first chicken, where did it come from?’

‘An egg,’ stated Chrestus.

‘But where did that egg come from?’ posed Mascius. ‘Applying it to the here and now, what comes first, the army or the money to finance it?’

‘The army, naturally,’ said Chrestus, ‘for without an army a kingdom may be overrun at any time. Therefore, an army has to exist to allow a kingdom to prosper.’

Aaron was having none of it. ‘I disagree. Without money, there can be no army, for how are soldiers to be paid, equipped and fed?’

‘Are you all right, Rsan?’

I noted the concern in Gallia’s voice and looked at the city governor, his elbow resting on the table and his hand holding his head. He opened his eyes.

‘If you will forgive me, majesty, I think I will leave the meeting. Almas will provide any information you require.’

He tried to get up but slumped back in his chair, his walking stick falling to the floor. In an instant Chrestus and Almas were by his side, ensuring he did not fall out of his chair.

‘Guards,’ I called.

Two Durans rushed into the room.

‘Governor Rsan is to be carried back to his home. See to it.’

It was in fact the general of the army himself who carried Rsan back to his mansion a short distance from the Citadel. I ordered the officer of the watch to send one of his men to fetch Alcaeus to attend the ill governor, telling Mascius to return to the palace while Gallia and I followed the burly Chrestus carrying the governor in his muscular arms.

‘He looks so frail,’ said Gallia, her voice laced with concern,

‘He will be fine, he has just been working too hard,’ I tried to reassure her.

We both knew it was a lie. For months Almas had been undertaking the lion's share of Rsan's duties, but neither of us wanted to admit that our aged governor was mortal.

Chrestus strode to the mansion and carried Rsan upstairs to his bedroom. Alarmed servants fussed around their master, unsure what to do aside from offering him water. Chrestus gently raised Rsan's head so he could take a sip of the cool liquid.

'Thank you, you are very kind.'

Rsan's voice was very weak and I had trouble discerning his words. Gallia beside me was growing increasingly concerned, looking at me with fear in her eyes. She rallied when Alcaeus, our wiry haired Greek friend arrived, himself now old and grey.

'Give me some room,' he said brusquely, 'and give Rsan some dignity. Out, all of you.'

We left the room to gather downstairs in the spacious reception hall, the head servant greeting us and enquiring as to whether we required refreshments.

'No,' snapped Gallia, pacing up and down on the white marble floor.

Chrestus stood staring at his boots, Gallia continued her pacing and I looked to the top of the stairs. There was no mistress of the house for Rsan had never married, and therefore no children to fill the building with noise. As a result the governor's mansion was quiet, which as the minutes passed became oppressive, the air becoming heavy with dread. It only increased when an ashen-faced Alcaeus appeared at the top of the stairs and slowly made his way down to us. With every step he took the knot in my stomach twisted tighter. I gasped for air, certain he was carrying terrible news.

'He is gone,' he said quietly.

Gallia clutched her hands to her face and began sobbing. I put my arms around her and we sobbed together. Alcaeus and Chrestus laid hands on my shoulders and even the eyes of the granite-hard general of Dura's army were moist. Rsan had been the first person we had seen when we had arrived at Dura all those years ago. We were two fresh-faced, cocky individuals in their early twenties who thought they knew everything, even how to rule their own kingdom. He had walked from the closed Palmyrene Gate in the aftermath of the disastrous rule of Prince Mithridates, lucky to have escaped with his life when the prince had fled the city prior to our arrival. In the years following, his quiet professionalism, dedication and loyalty had seen him rise to become city governor, the living embodiment of the qualities Dura stood for. Rsan was the constant amid all the wars, upheavals and uncertainty that had engulfed Parthia over four decades, a beacon of light in what was often a dark world. And now that light had been snuffed out.

Gallia wiped a tear from her cheek.

'How can this be?'

Alcaeus cupped her cheek with his hand.

‘He was old, Gallia. He was in his nineties, if you can believe it. The spirit was willing but there comes a time when the body gives up. So it was with my dear friend. It will be me next.’

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ I reprimanded him. ‘You are perfectly fit and well. I will hear no more of your nonsense.’

He took offence at my words.

‘Even the great King of Dura has no power to halt the ageing process, though it may come as a surprise to your highness. You have been at Ctesiphon too long if you believe it is nonsensical I will die. Besides, I grow weary of the world.’

‘I meant no offence, Alcaeus,’ I said, ‘it was the grief talking.’

He looked at me with kindness in his eyes.

‘I know. Would you like to say goodbye?’

Gallia needed no second prompting, walking up the stairs with Alcaeus for support. I followed, though Chrestus remained where he was. Alcaeus stopped and turned to look at him.

‘I was not always kind to him,’ admitted the general.

‘I know,’ said Alcaeus, ‘but he was fond of you, Chrestus, you who keep us all safe in our beds at night. He knew you were a great servant of the kingdom, just as he was. He enjoyed your sparing bouts during the council meetings.’

Chrestus followed us up the stairs and into the bedroom. Servants had closed the shutters to subdue the brightness.

‘He looks so frail,’ said Gallia, bending down to kiss Rsan’s forehead.

I held one of his hands. ‘Goodbye, old friend, Shamash will welcome you into heaven where you will once again enjoy the company of Godarz and Marcus. Pass on my regards to them.’

Godarz had been Rsan’s predecessor and had fought beside me in Italy with Spartacus, while Marcus Sutonium was a captured Roman who elected to stay in Dura, rising to become the army’s quartermaster-general. Both gone; both still missed greatly. They and others now only a memory to those they had been close to. Shamash bless them all.

Chrestus stood as stiff as a spear, saluting Rsan before turning and marching from the room. His display of uncaring military stiffness fooled no one, but Chrestus was not a man to allow his feelings to become public.

After the body was washed, dressed in a white robe and moved downstairs into the reception hall, mourners were allowed into the mansion to pay their respects, guards being placed inside and outside Rsan’s home to ensure an orderly procession. I was not surprised a long queue formed early and grew during the afternoon and into the evening as word spread of the governor’s death.

Old and young, rich and poor alike waited patiently in line to pay their respects, Chrestus' soldiers patrolling to ensure the mourners were not pestered by pickpockets, hawkers and beggars. While this was going on, I instructed a great funeral pyre be constructed halfway between the Palmyrene Gate and the legionary camp.

Soldiers felled date palm trees for the pyre, arranging the wood to resemble a square tower with a flat top, access to which was reached via wooden steps. The construction of the pyre and steps was overseen by Lucius Varsas, the army's quartermaster general, to ensure the cremation ceremony went smoothly.

After battles, the dead were usually cremated as a way of dealing with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of bodies. But after a while cremation came to symbolise a fitting end for warriors, a celebration of an epic life. And the greater the conflagration the greater the recipient's glory, which is why I ordered Rsan's pyre to be so large. Rsan had never been near a battlefield but under his steady hand Dura's star had risen high and I was determined to award him full military honours.

I carried Rsan's body from his mansion to the pyre, along with Chrestus, Azad, commander of cataphracts, and Sporaces, commander of horse archers. Gallia was worried about my leg but I told her I would not let my friend down on his final journey. We were preceded by the high priest of the city's temple of Shamash accompanied by a retinue of his white-robed priests and flanked by a century of Durans. Exiles lined either side of the road leading from the Citadel down to the Palmyrene Gate. The procession was slow and Rsan's body light so the journey was not too taxing. Even so, I was relieved when a party of Durans took the litter and we retreated to stand beside the other chief mourners, which included Gallia, Aaron and Almas.

The Amazons sat on their horses behind their queen, the cataphracts in full dress uniform arrayed in a long line behind them and Dura's horse archers deployed in four dragons – four thousand men – around the pyre. Not all the Durans and Exiles were present, many garrisoning the forts along the Euphrates north and south of the city, but those remaining in camp stood in their immaculately dressed ranks. And behind all the troops were thousands of Dura's citizens, all standing in silence with heads bowed as they said farewell to their governor. Colour parties from the Durans and Exiles stood before the pyre with the golden griffin and silver lion standards, while behind me Minu, commander of the Amazons, held my griffin banner.

Massed in a separate group stood Dura's lords and their retainers, in many ways an image of a bygone age when the desert around the city was a hostile sea. In such an environment, only the lawless, desperate and those condemned to a life of exile made their homes in the Kingdom of Dura. King of Kings Sinatruces, who had been high king when I had been captured by the Romans, found it very convenient to banish those he suspected of being disloyal to the kingdom

west of the River Euphrates, condemning them to a life of battling scorpions and the Agraci. Many died and those who survived did so because they built mud-brick strongholds a short distance from either the river or the city. It was a harsh, unforgiving life that bred individuals who possessed both traits in abundance. But two generations had passed since I had made peace with the Agraci and during that time the kingdom had changed beyond all recognition. Dura's lords now traded with the Agraci and some of their daughters had even married King Malik's warlords.

Among them were our daughter Eszter and her husband Dalir. They lived in a grand mansion-cum-stronghold in the desert beside their very own oasis to produce an earthly paradise. But their marriage was not a happy one. They were now both in their thirties and their attempts to start a family had resulted in a son that had died after a few days. Eszter had been distraught and then distant, Dalir had become frustrated and then angry and they now lived separate lives. Eszter divided her time between the mansion and the palace, while Dalir was in Palmyra a lot, getting drunk and whoring. But on official occasions and instances such as Rsan's funeral, they put on a united front.

The sun was high in the sky but the high priest waited until it was midday before passing the sun disc to one of his juniors and raising his hands to the heavens. Like all who filled his position, he had a thick beard, powerful lungs and a booming voice, which carried far as he called on the Sun God to bless Rsan.

'Shamash, noble among the Anunnakki, prince among the Igigi, pre-eminent leader, guide of the people. Judge of heaven and earth, unchanging with regard to his command. Shamash, organiser of darkness, bringer of light for humanity. Shamash, at your setting, humanity's light darkens; Shamash, at your rising, the four quarters brighten.

'By your rising all humanity is warmed. Beasts, living creatures, animals of the steppe. They continually give you their lives, their limbs. You judge the case of the wronged man and woman. You make their verdict right.

'Look upon your poor but faithful servant Rsan, Great One. We beg you to embrace his soul so he may serve faithfully just as he has served King Pacorus and Queen Gallia, who are both high in your favour, Shamash. We commit his soul to your warm embrace, Great One, knowing your kindness and mercy will shine on it just as your power brings warmth to the world each day.'

He lowered his arms, turned and nodded to another priest holding a flaming torch. The priest stepped forward, bowed his head and handed me the shaft, retreating after he had done so. I looked at the body of Rsan wrapped in a white linen shroud on top of the pyre, which had been soaked in oil. I walked forward and lit the oil and tinder at the base of the pyre, thrusting the torch

into the flames once the fire had caught hold. I walked back to stand beside Gallia, the pyre suddenly erupting into flames and roaring as the oil and tinder ignited.

‘Farewell, old friend.’

So passed Rsan, the Kingdom of Dura’s treasurer, governor, loyal servant and true Parthian. Only now did I realise what a rock he had been not only to me but also the whole kingdom. As the inferno caught hold and reduced Rsan’s body to ashes, I glanced at Almas, the former horse archer officer and later self-made businessman who by chance happened to purchase the mansion next door to Rsan’s from the rich proceeds of his antimony business. The black stone his workers mined in the desert was ground into dust and mixed with olive oil to produce the dark eye makeup worn by the wealthy females of Parthia, Syria, Judea and Egypt. In truth, we all used it to block the sun’s harsh glare and repel the small desert flies that carried diseases and infections. The insatiable demand for antimony made Almas rich but his real value to me and the kingdom was his keen mind and his desire to continue to serve Dura. He would make a good governor, Shamash be praised.

We stayed until the pyre was nothing more than a huge pile of glowing embers, Rsan’s body having been turned to ash and his time on earth now only a memory. The crowds drifted away and Chrestus issued orders for the army to return to barracks. After the cataphracts and horse archers had departed, Gallia gained her saddle and went to talk with Eszter and Dalir, taking half the Amazons with her. I rode with the rest to the Palmyrene Gate where I dismounted and left Horns with the duty officer.

‘Take the standard back to the palace,’ I commanded Minu who was holding the banner.

She saluted and trotted away, behind her two files of female riders. I caught sight of Haya behind her, the lithe beauty who had corrupted Klietas, my former squire now a lord in Media. How strange and intricate are the workings of the gods.

I left the bustle and press of people, carts and animals at the entrance to the city and walked up the stone steps leading to the top of the gatehouse where the stone griffin was located. It was guarded at all times though I had no idea why. It weighed several tons and would be impossible to steal. I dismissed the guards and leaned back against the statue, looking to the west where camel trains were making their way to Palmyra some hundred miles distant. In moments of sadness or uncertainty I took comfort and strength in being alone with the stone griffin, which did not age or change with the passage of time.

‘You are getting sentimental in your old age, son of Hatra.’

I did not bother to turn but smiled at the familiar voice.

‘How so?’

‘Organising a funeral more suitable for a king rather than an over-promoted clerk.’

‘You are unkind. Rsan was a faithful servant and a dear friend.’

A cackle. ‘If you laid on a similar ceremony for all those you believe have been faithful to you, there would be no trees left along both banks of the Euphrates. Your governor had an easy, pampered life. And you have a better replacement, even if he is a cripple.’

‘He is not a cripple.’

A guffaw. ‘Only you could choose a one-handed man to be your city governor, and I see you have acquired another waif to add to the list of the lost and wretched you have endeavoured to save throughout your life. No doubt you will make the latest one the commander of your army.’

‘For your information, Mascius will I believe become a valuable addition to the government of Dura.’

‘Perhaps, son of Hatra, perhaps. Why the gods favour and indulge you I have no idea, but they do. Which is just as well since you are about to begin the surrender talks with the Romans.’

‘I am doing no such thing. The forthcoming negotiations will establish a lasting peace between Parthia and Rome.’

Another cackle. ‘Still the dreamer, I see. You want my advice?’

‘I have always sought it.’

A snort of derision. ‘Have you added lying to your many talents? Well, my advice would be to send one of your wife’s female assassins to kill the bastard child of Phraates, thus bringing to an end these ridiculous negotiations. They are rather splendid, though.’

‘What?’

‘Gallia’s assassins. And very efficient. A handful of women with the right tools capable of achieving more than thousands of men hacking at each other with swords for hours on end. But then your wife always had a more realistic view of the world than you.’

I pointed to the west, to the caravans travelling east and west on the road to and from Palmyra.

‘That is realism. Peace and prosperity instead of war and a barren landscape. I make no apologies for making it come about.’

There was silence and I allowed myself a smug smile.

‘No witty, caustic retort?’

‘I was taking time to think, son of Hatra. I was pondering whether if you were to lay all the corpses of the men you have killed over the years in your quest for peace side-by-side on that road, how many bodies would still be left when you reached Palmyra? By the way, the gods are sending

you a great gift, one that will give you your greatest victory over the Romans. Until the next time, son of Hatra.'

And then there was silence and I was left with another one of Dobbai's riddles to solve.

