

Chapter 1

Success is infectious. Dura's army had taken no part in the great victory won outside the town of Melitene in Cappadocia the previous summer. But everyone in the kingdom knew it was Dura's triumph. It had been Dura's chief scout and the commander of the Amazons who had alerted High King Phraates of the great enemy coalition that was preparing to invade Gordyene. It was Dura which sent its genius commander, Kewab, to assist King Castus in defeating that enemy alliance. And it was Kewab's plan that had won a great victory, perhaps the greatest victory achieved by a Parthian army. And Dura basked in the glory won by its favourite son. When Kewab and his soldiers returned to the city, he and they were greeted by cheering crowds, thousands chanting 'pharaoh', 'pharaoh', in recognition of his ancestry and his military skills. His soldiers were decorated with garlands, young women kissed the hand of the returning hero and pregnant women declared their intention to name their infants after him, even if they gave birth to females.

The whole army was paraded for the benefit of the returning heroes. The Durans and Exiles were arrayed in their cohorts, the dragon of cataphracts stood in full armour on their horses similarly attired, and the horse archers lined up in their companies before the Palmyrene Gate, the white tunics of Dura deploying next to the red uniforms of the exiles of Mesene, now resident in the reincarnated city of Mari. Dura's lords, their families and retainers also came to pay their respects to Kewab, their indisciplined and flowing black and brown robes in stark contrast to the well-dressed ranks of Dura's soldiers.

King Malik and Queen Jamal came from Palmyra with two hundred black-clad Agraci warriors to salute the man who had helped their grandson, the King of Gordyene, become the most feared warlord in northern Parthia. Castus was the young king who had covered the allies of Rome and sent a clear message to Rome itself that Gordyene was to be meddled with at its peril.

In recognition of his services to Parthia and his talents, Kewab was asked to join Dura's royal council, though whether he liked listening to Almas discussing irrigation systems, rebuilding work at Mari or Ira's mind-numbingly boring lectures on Dura's finances, he did not say. Though to his credit he did manage to stay awake during council meetings, which is more than can be said of the aged Aaron and Rsan, governor and treasurer respectively, who often dozed off during proceedings.

When the dust of exhilaration had settled and life at Dura returned to normal, no one noticed seven weathered figures dressed in black robes riding from the north and entering the

city without fanfare to journey to the Citadel. There was nothing to mark them out as being unusual or particularly conspicuous, which had been the point. They disappeared into the Citadel without notice. Treated as greater heroes than Kewab by the queen, they were all sworn to secrecy concerning the mission they had just completed, though each of them was rewarded by Gallia personally. They then slipped back into their former lives; all save one.

Klietas had left Dura in the aftermath of the assassins' return, and as he left another returned to the kingdom. Alcaeus, Companion, physician, austere Greek and former head of the army's medical corps, had been away for over a year. He had travelled to Syria and then taken ship to Greece, having been desirous to see Athens, the 'cradle of civilisation' as he termed it, before he died.

I had first met him in Italy, a sinewy Greek with a mop of thick black hair treating injured soldiers, who like him had been former slaves before finding refuge with the Thracian gladiator Spartacus. It was my great fortune that Alcaeus not only survived the crushing of the slave revolt but accompanied me back to Parthia. Now his hair and beard were grey, though still thick, his step was shorter, and he had taken to having a nap most afternoons. But his mind was as sharp as ever and his tongue as keen as the edge of a freshly sharpened *gladius*.

In the weeks after his return I had made regular visits to his home, a rather austere two-storey mud-brick house a short walk from the Citadel. He could have had a mansion like Byrd but, true to his Greek roots, preferred to live in modest circumstances. There were aspects to the house to indicate its owner was a man of substance, however, such as a stone floor instead of mud, a bathing room and servants to attend to his needs. But the furniture was functional rather than opulent, though the couches we reclined on were plump with cushions, and the wine we were served was not diluted according to the Greek custom but was rather a fine vintage from Susiana.

'General Kewab is the talk of the Roman world, or at least the bits I travelled through,' he told me.

'He is a rare talent,' I agreed. 'We are lucky to have him, though I worry we will not be able to hold on to him.'

He raised a grey eyebrow. 'Oh? I thought he was an officer in Dura's army.'

I ran a finger around the rim of my cup. 'That was years ago. He is now a satrap, was once deputy lord high general of the empire and Lord Melitene. By rights, he should be living in a grand mansion at Ctesiphon and attending the high king.'

'Then why isn't he?'

'Loyalty to Dura, I suppose.'

‘Loyalty to its king, more like,’ he said.

‘I like to think so, but I fear Dura is now too small for a man of his reputation and talents.’

‘Perhaps young Castus will start another war in which Kewab can fill the world with his radiance once more.’

‘Parthia’s western frontier is not a problem, or at least it should not be. The real threat lies in the east, and when the Kushans have finished fighting the Satavahanas, they will turn their attention to Parthia’s eastern kingdoms, notwithstanding the perpetual peace that supposedly exists between the Kushan Empire and Parthia.’

‘How is your friend Kujula?’ he grinned mischievously.

‘Recovered and returned to full health, I am informed, which is bad news for Parthia.’

He looked thoughtful. ‘Perhaps Gallia should send assassins to kill him.’

I had told him all about Gallia’s band she had despatched to the north to do her dirty work, about how they learned of the alliance of enemy kings intent on attacking Gordyene, of how Tiridates had been killed in the Battle of Melitene, how her assassins had killed Prince Atrax, Laodice and Glaphyra, and how they had fallen foul of King Castus and taken offence at the actions of King Akmon. And how Titus Tullus had died in the hills of Pontus. Gallia had also reported with glee that King Amyntas of Galatia had also been killed, slaughtered in some internal quarrel. She had been delighted and relished in the vengeance she had served on her enemies. Her saw my glum expression.

‘What did you expect, Pacorus, that Gallia would mellow with age and take to gardening to see out her autumn years? She is a Gaul and we all know the attributes of that particular race, not that I am one to generalise about tribes and peoples. Nevertheless...’

‘All Gauls appear to have similar traits,’ I interrupted.

‘In her defence, her actions appear to have made Parthia stronger in the eyes of her potential enemies.’

‘Has she, my friend? She has strengthened the hold of Augustus Caesar over Cappadocia, Pontus and Galatia, the latter having been reduced to a province under a Roman governor.’

Alcaeus shrugged. ‘At the very least, Phraates must be delighted both Tiridates and Atrax are dead.’

I took a large gulp of wine. ‘Phraates? As long as others are bleeding on his behalf, he is happy to play the god-king. It is an outrage he has not rewarded Kewab with a kingdom of his own to rule. If I were high king...’

He rose from his couch, picked up the wine jug and walked over to top up my cup.

‘Ah, now we return to the age-old question. Why was not Pacorus of Dura created high king?’

‘Because he did not want the position,’ I shot back.

He retook his couch. ‘I often wonder if you made the right decision, and whether Parthia, and Dura, would have been saved the spilling of an ocean of blood if you had seized the high crown after the death of Orodes.’

He smiled. ‘It is irrelevant now. But at the very least, neither Tiridates nor Atrax will be fomenting any more trouble on Parthia’s borders. You have Gallia to thank for that.’

I took a swig of wine. ‘The fomenting now occurs within my kingdom, in that wretched Sanctuary.’

He chuckled. ‘A former brothel, I believe. There is a certain amount of irony in Gallia’s choice of headquarters for the Amazons.’

‘There is only one headquarters in Dura,’ I said irritably, ‘and that is in the Citadel.’

At that moment, I spilt wine on my tunic.

‘In the name of the gods,’ I cursed.

He clapped to bring the head servant into the *andron*, the room reserved for entertaining that was the preserve of men only, a Greek custom Gallia found infuriating. The manservant saw my stained white tunic, disappeared and a couple of minutes later reappeared with a young girl carrying a sponge and a bowl of water.

‘You should remove your tunic, majesty,’ said the manservant, ‘otherwise the stain will be permanent.’

‘Fetch the king a new garment,’ ordered Alcaeus.

The manservant bellowed a command to bring a new tunic, making us both jump and causing me to spill more wine down my tunic. Moments later a new garment was brought. I unbuckled my sword belt and removed the stained article, the servants lowering their heads to avoid gazing upon the body of the king. I put on the clean tunic, which felt abrasive against my skin. Alcaeus smiled. I did not.

‘This feels like sackcloth,’ I complained.

‘It will make you more virtuous,’ said Alcaeus.

I pondered for a moment. ‘You mean wearing uncomfortable garb means a person will not have immoral thoughts because his mind is focused on his whole torso itching?’

He rolled his eyes. ‘I assume you have heard of Plato?’

‘A Greek, a thinker, I seem to recall,’ I answered.

Another roll of the eyes, this time accompanied by a sigh.

‘Plato was a Greek philosopher, Pacorus, which is more than a thinker, whatever that may be. To cut to the quick, he believed the well-being of society rested on the four pillars of wisdom, courage, justice and temperance.

‘The first three are self-explanatory, but the fourth is sadly neglected, which is a pity because it is most important.’

I scratched my chest. ‘So, in Greece, wearing uncomfortable clothes makes people better citizens.’

‘Temperance is crucial in regulating the pleasures and basic desires of citizens,’ he said very slowly. ‘Self-control in all things prevents individuals becoming decadent and immoral.’

He stood and began pacing. ‘For example, how did an army of around seven thousand Greeks hold off tens of thousands of Persians at the Battle of Thermopylae?’

‘Better tactics, a very favourable position and a brilliant commander,’ I answered. ‘Plus, the help of the gods.’

He shook his head. ‘Obedience, endurance, courage and self-control, the characteristics of Spartan society, held the pass at Thermopylae in the face of overwhelming odds, Pacorus, against a Persian foe riddled with decadence, depravity and corruption.’

‘The Persians still won,’ I said.

He pointed at me. ‘Only through the base treachery of a Greek who showed the Persians a way through the mountains to allow them to get behind the Greek position.’

He retook his couch. ‘Let me ask you a question. You find Ctesiphon distasteful?’

‘I do.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it is full of scheming courtiers and their wives, who live in gilded cages, and over-ambitious priests who serve themselves instead of the gods.’

‘No. It is because the immorality and decadence of Ctesiphon offends you, Pacorus. Because in your heart you are a moral individual who practises temperance. Why do you not wear the garments purchased for you in celebration of your sixtieth birthday? You remember them?’

I smiled when I remembered a white silk robe upon which were stitched red griffins, and a red silk sash that acted as a belt, a birthday gift from Byrd.

‘They are in a chest in the palace somewhere,’ I said. ‘They were made by the Governor of Syria’s tailor.’ I wracked my brains. ‘Cinna, that was his name.’

‘And why do you not wear them on a daily basis?’

‘I am not a Babylonian peacock,’ I told him.

'I rest my case. You are at heart a simple, straightforward man, Pacorus, which is why you have achieved so much for so long. Kewab is cast in a similar mould, actually, which accounts for his many achievements.'

'I'm sure there is a compliment in there somewhere,' I said, scratching my shoulder.

'So, you have really retired?' he asked me, changing the subject.

'I have, unless Dura is attacked, of course. But there will be no more tramping around the empire for me. I'm too old to spend weeks on end sleeping in a tent and sitting all day on a horse.'

'Quite right,' he agreed. 'You and Gallia should organise a trip, a holiday.'

I laughed. 'Holiday?'

'Why not? Perhaps you could take her to Italy and then Gaul.'

I nearly choked on my wine.

'There is probably still an arrest warrant that has my name on it in circulation in Italy, Alcaeus.'

He wagged a finger at me. 'That is ancient history, my friend. If my experience in Greece is anything to go by, you and Gallia would be feted by all and sundry. The Romans love to be associated with living legends and individuals who have links to the past. You and Gallia fought Crassus and Mark Antony, and both have passed into Roman folklore.'

'You mean we are both ancient relics.'

He laughed. 'Naturally. But even me, a lowly physician in the slave army of Spartacus, was treated with respect and awe by the wealthy and influential of Athens.'

I grinned at him. 'No wonder you were away for so long if the fine ladies of Athens were making their couches available to you.'

'The spirit may have been willing, my friend, but the body manifested a serious dereliction of its duties in that department.'

'No regrets about leaving Athens?'

He looked reflective. 'The city I knew in my youth is no more. The buildings are the same, of course. And, loathe as I am to admit it, are in a better condition now than in previous years. The Romans are very clever. They rule Greece with a light touch, which has allowed the indigenous élite and wealthy to flourish. And Greek is an official language of the Roman world alongside Latin. In this way, Rome steadily and stealthily increases its grip over Greece and the Greeks. For example, that Roman ambassador who was killed in Pontus last year, along with our friend Titus Tullus.'

'I read the reports but cannot remember his name.'

‘Well, did you know he was a Greek?’

‘I did not.’

‘A friend of Augustus himself, by all accounts. So, you see, every office is open to Greeks of good standing and access to wealth. That is how you conquer a people, Pacorus, by seducing them with opportunities and the prospect of a better life.’

He sighed. ‘Perhaps one day there will be a Greek leader of the Roman world.’

‘Then he can set Greece free,’ I said naively, the effects of too much wine clouding my thoughts.

‘People do not want to be free, my friend, they want easy lives with no responsibilities. And if Rome can give them that, they will see no reason to change their rulers.’

I usually stayed with Alcaeus all afternoon, but our musings and reminiscences were interrupted by Almas arriving at my Greek friend’s home. The former commander of a dragon of horse archers had taken on more and more of Rsan’s responsibilities as governor as my old friend’s health failed and he became frailer with every passing year. Almas’ military career ended abruptly when he lost his left hand during the Phraaspa campaign, turning his hand to commerce when he purchased an area of barren land in the western half of the kingdom that turned out to be rich in antimony. Ground down and made into a powder, it was exported to Egypt where rich women used it as face makeup, and throughout Parthia men and women applied it around the eyes as a defence against the glare of the sun.

The subsequent mining operation made Almas rich and allowed him to purchase a large house in Dura next to Rsan’s. The pair became acquaintances and then friends, which would result in Almas becoming a servant of the crown once more, albeit in a civilian capacity.

Everything about Almas was business-like, from his neatly trimmed beard and well-groomed brown hair, to the simple leather cover over the stump on his left arm. Despite his wealth he had not allowed himself to run to fat, retaining the tall, lean physique that characterised so many of Dura’s horse archers. He had a keen, eager mind that made him a bundle of energy, making it difficult for him to keep still.

I found him pacing up and down in the shade of Alcaeus’ modest courtyard, stopping and bowing his head when he spotted me.

‘You looked troubled, Almas.’

He extended his right hand, in which was a papyrus scroll.

‘This has just arrived at the Citadel, majesty. I thought you would want to see it straight away.’

I took the scroll and saw the seal of the Governor of Syria pressed into the bitumen. The dark grey eyes of Almas never left the document as I unrolled it and read the Greek words. Relations between Dura and Syria were most amicable, the border between the province and kingdom being only loosely patrolled. Most commercial traffic went west to Palmyra and on to Damascus and the coast, or through Judea to Egypt. Direct communications between myself and the Roman authorities in Syria was rare, which was why Almas' face registered concern.

'It is not from the governor,' I told them. 'It is from someone called Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, who requests an audience with me, though he does not say what about.'

'Odd,' said Alcaeus.

I handed the letter back to Almas.

'Find out who this Agrippa is. He must have some influence if he is using the seal of the Governor of Syria.'

The next day, Almas rode to Palmyra to discuss the matter with Byrd, whose business empire covered western Parthia, Syria, Judea, and parts of Egypt, Cilicia and Cappadocia. My old chief scout rarely visited the offices of his extensive transport network, delegating the day-to-day running to trusted subordinates. But he insisted on his head offices producing regular reports that were sent to Palmyra, and also sent his personal aides to carry out spot-checks on said offices. When Almas returned a week later, Byrd had informed him all about the Roman requesting to see me.

I sat with Gallia and the deputy-governor on the palace terrace, Gallia's expression changing from one of indifference to a frown and finally a scowl as Almas read from the notes he had written in Byrd's company.

'Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa is forty years old and a lifelong friend of Augustus Caesar. By all accounts he is somewhat of a protégé, having become a *praetor urbanus* at the age of twenty-four.'

'What is that?' asked Gallia, her blue eyes boring into the parchment Almas was reading from. Perhaps she hoped it would burst into flames and save her from hearing any more about this important Roman.

'The official responsible for the administration of justice in Rome, majesty,' Almas answered.

'Is there any justice in the Roman world?' she sneered.

I nodded to Almas he should continue.

'Well, after that position Agrippa became governor of Gaul.'

Gallia pressed her lips together and her eyebrows lowered.

‘Oppressor of Gaul, you mean,’ she hissed.

I shook my head at her. ‘Not now, Gallia. Did Agrippa remain governor for long?’

‘A year, by all accounts, majesty,’ replied Almas, ‘after which he became consul, a position of great power in the Roman world.’

‘The post is akin to being a king,’ said Gallia through gritted teeth, ‘though Roman vanity would never admit to such a thing.’

‘He and Augustus shared power,’ continued Almas, perusing his notes, ‘before Agrippa was appointed to the position of *aedile*, a magistrate responsible for public buildings in Rome. In this role, he supervised a substantial urban renewal programme in the city, building three new aqueducts, restoring the sewers and paving the streets.’

‘Dura needs more paved streets,’ I said. ‘I have neglected my city for too long.’

They both looked at me with surprise.

‘You have been busy saving the empire from internal and external enemies,’ said Gallia. ‘Besides, we have paved streets in Dura.’

‘Not enough,’ I lamented. ‘The main thoroughfares are paved, but many of the side streets are in the same condition now as when we first arrived in Dura.’

‘You have wisely concentrated on maintaining a strong army and ensuring the defences of the city are strong, majesty,’ Almas told me, ‘rather than waste funds on aesthetics.’

‘Well said,’ agreed Gallia.

But a morose mood came over me.

‘I went there once, to Rome, I mean. It is a magnificent city, full of grand government buildings, ornate temples and luxurious mansions. It deserves to be maintained.’

Gallia rolled her eyes and Almas nodded politely.

‘Perhaps the most interesting thing about Agrippa, majesty,’ said Almas, ‘was that he won the victory at Actium.’

I was surprised. ‘I thought it was Octavian’s victory?’

‘Octavian, now Augustus, was the commander, majesty, yes, but devolved authority to his friend. Agrippa is a veteran general of some twenty years’ experience.’

I picked up an almond pastry and took a bite.

‘It begs the question: why is such a powerful Roman desirous to visit Dura?’

Gallia also picked up a pastry. ‘Not out of courtesy, I can guarantee that. The Romans do nothing out of the goodness of their hearts. This Agrippa is after something.’

I finished my pastry. ‘But what?’

Gallia picked up the small silver dish holding the cakes and offered it to Almas, who smiled and took a pastry.

‘The only way we will discover what he wants is to meet with him,’ I said. ‘Convey my compliments to the governor of Syria, Almas, and inform him Dura’s king, and queen, will be delighted to extend the hand of friendship to Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa.’

He stood, bowed his head to us both and marched from the terrace. I began to use the fingers on my right hand to count down the seconds.

‘You should not welcome high-ranking Romans here, Pacorus.’

‘Ten’, I said, halting my count. ‘You are getting mellow in your old age.’

‘What? Don’t be childish. Nothing good will come from you allowing this Roman to visit Dura.’

I leaned back in my chair, wincing when a sharp pain shot down my left leg. Gallia gave me a kindly look.

‘Are you in discomfort?’

‘Nothing I am not used to. Some days are better than others. I could do with a dip in that magical pool that Claudia used to cure Adapa of his leprosy.’

She smiled. ‘I remember. I’m sure Claudia could arrange it.’

‘The thought is tempting, especially on days like this.’

I glanced at her.

‘I will invite Agrippa to stay in the palace during his sojourn in Dura.’

‘What?’

‘I would appreciate it if your assassins did not murder the second-most important man in the Roman world while he is a guest under my roof.’

‘Under *our* roof,’ she hissed.

‘How do you know he is not planning to kill *us*?’ she asked smugly.

‘As far as I am aware, assassins do not send word ahead to the victims of their intentions, though I am not an expert in the field. Unlike you.’

She raised her eyes to the sky. ‘Not all this again. What is done is done, Pacorus. There is no point raking over old ground.’

She was right, not that I approved of her actions, far from it. But I had neither the will nor the stamina to engage in what would become a drawn-out argument about the rights and wrongs of assassination.

‘Has Haya said anything about Klietas?’ I asked.

‘I have not spoken to Haya since she returned from the north,’ she said tersely.

When I discovered Klietas had left Dura I was disappointed, especially as he did not come to the palace to inform me in person. I spoke to Almas, who enquired of the man he had placed with Klietas concerning where my former squire had departed to. But the vague answer of 'Media' made me none the wiser and then my time had been absorbed in the rebuilding of Mari, the former ruins of a great city some forty miles south of Dura, which was being restored to accommodate the soldiers that had accompanied Kewab from the east, plus the exiles from Mesene. It was an undertaking that was absorbing a large amount of time and money, and the subject of Klietas was pushed into the background. Gallia told me it was his decision to leave Dura, that she respected it and so should I.

'I suppose you want me to be on my best behaviour when the Roman arrives?' she said, changing the subject.

'It would be appreciated, my sweet.'

'But I will be posting extra guards in the Citadel.'

'I would expect nothing less.'

With Agrippa given clearance to visit the King of Dura, the friend of the ruler of the Roman world was escorted from the border with Syria by Azad, the commander of Dura's cataphracts, and a company of his men in full war gear. Almas was also at the border to welcome Agrippa, and though I had not made it compulsory, all the members of the royal council, Chrestus, the commander of the army, Sporaces, commander of horse archers, Lucius Varsas, quartermaster general, Sophus, chief medical officer, and all their senior officers, gathered in the Citadel's courtyard the afternoon the Roman dignitary arrived in the city.

Gallia looked beautiful that day, her hair shining in the sunlight, her blue eyes sparkling and her armour shimmering with an otherworldly glow. The cuirass that was a gift from the gods, that no mortal hand had fashioned, accentuated her still shapely figure and made her stand out among all the mail armour, scale armour, burnished helmets and whetted javelin points glinting in the sun. She stood beside me and below us a hundred Amazons sat on their horses in the courtyard, their faces enclosed by the large cheek guards of their helmets, their white saddlecloths decorated with red griffins in the corners.

A century of Durans stood to attention in the courtyard and a fanfare of trumpets reverberated around the square when Azad led his company on to the cobblestones. Beside him rode a tall, imposing man attired in a magnificent bronze muscled cuirass, a large, expensive red cloak draped around his broad shoulders. On his other side was Almas. Immediately behind them was a score of Roman horsemen in mail armour carrying lances, and behind them a company of Dura's cataphracts, their faces hidden by full-face helmets.

I stood at the top of the steps leading to the palace flanked by Rsan, Aaron, and Chrestus. Ashk, the palace steward, pointed at waiting stable hands who rushed forward to take the reins of the mounts of the three men sliding from their saddles. Azad saluted the Roman and Almas invited Agrippa to ascend the steps to greet his waiting hosts. Marcus Vipsanius smiled, nodded and took a look around the occupants of the courtyard before doing so, wearing a slightly perplexed expression when his eyes settled on the century of soldiers that must have looked familiar and yet unfamiliar. Their weapons and armour would not look out of place on a Roman parade square, but their white tunics and white-faced shields sporting red griffin wings marked them out as belonging to a foreign power.

Agrippa walked up the steps briskly to stand in front of me, raising his right arm in salute and bowing his head.

‘Hail Pacorus, King of Dura, former Lord High General of Parthia, victor of Surkh, Susa, Carrhae, Phraaspa, conqueror of the Kushans, Armenia, Cappadocia, Galatia and Pontus. Rome salutes you.’

I had been determined to remain stony faced when I met the friend of Augustus, to give the impression I was hard, unyielding, just like the soldiers of my army. But a smile crept over my face. I already liked this Roman who had obviously done his research. No one had mentioned the Battle of Surkh in an age. It was where I had acquired the scar on my right cheek.

‘Welcome Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa,’ I replied, ‘victor of Munda, Philippi and Actium.’

I too had done my homework. ‘Dura welcomes you and salutes your martial achievements.’

I extended an arm to Gallia. ‘This is my wife, Queen Gallia.’

Agrippa turned his head and bowed it to Gallia, my wife responding with a dazzling smile. So far, so good.

‘It is a great honour to meet you lady,’ said Agrippa, ‘long have I desired to cast my eyes on the most famous woman in the world, whose prowess on the battlefield is matched only by her grace and beauty off it.’

Gallia probably wanted to sneer, but this tall, broad-shouldered Roman with thin lips, a square jaw and strong brow was both handsome and a charmer. And when he smiled at Gallia she laughed back, delighted to be complimented by the second-most important man in the Roman world.

Like everyone who first saw Gallia’s magical cuirass, Agrippa was bedazzled by the armour that clung to my wife’s body like a second skin.

‘Magnificent,’ he muttered, his eyes staring directly at Gallia’s chest.

It could have been an awkward moment, but Gallia stepped forward to link her arm in Agrippa's.

'It was a gift,' she said softly, the two of them walking into the palace's reception porch after I had introduced the members of the royal council to the Roman.

Gallia chatted to him about nothing in particular: the weather, was his trip comfortable and did he miss his wife? He in turn asked about the Amazons, whether she missed Gaul and how did her fair skin fare in the heat of Mesopotamia. They gave the appearance of old friends as they wandered through the porch into the throne room, the doors of which were open. Rays of sunlight flooded through the windows positioned high in the walls, the light illuminating the griffin banner hanging behind the two empty thrones sitting on the stone dais at the far end of the chamber. Only when he was within feet of the flag did Agrippa halt to admire my standard.

'This is the same standard gifted to you by the seer Dobbai, majesty?' he asked me.

His eyes examined the white silk, on which had been stitched a red griffin on either side, the whole banner edged with gold.

'It is,' I told him.

Gallia was impressed by his knowledge. 'It was presented to my husband when Dobbai was the personal sorceress of King of Kings Sinatruces. We were living in Hatra at the time and about to make our journey to Dura.'

'How long ago was that, majesty?' he enquired.

'Over forty years ago,' she replied.

He moved closer to the banner, one of the guards deployed around the dais moving to bar his way.

'Only a chosen few are allowed to lay their hands on Dura's banner,' I said.

Agrippa backed away. 'Of course. It appears freshly made. Extraordinary.'

He looked at me. 'I am glad to be viewing it in a quiet chamber as opposed to across a battlefield, majesty.'

'Me, too, Marcus,' I said. 'You may be interested to know that the armour I am wearing is older than my standard. Me and it have grown old together.'

It may have angered the gods, but I had given my celestial cuirass to Kewab, reasoning that since I had retired from military campaigning, it would be of more use to him than me. His victories in Cappadocia had elevated him to the position of demi-god in the empire, so he might as well look the part. In truth, I had found it too ostentatious and preferred the armour that had been another gift, albeit one from a gruff German rather than an immortal.

'It must have graced many battlefields, majesty,' said Agrippa.

I stroked the black leather cuirass, which was muscled like Agrippa's and was embossed with a golden sun motif on the upper chest, with two golden winged lions immediately beneath. It had fringed strips of black leather that covered the thighs and shoulders, which were decorated with golden bees. Most of the strips were not original, having been replaced over the years when the armour had been repaired, usually after a campaign.

We left the throne room to walk on to the palace terrace where couches had been arranged under the awning to make Agrippa feel at home, or at least put him at ease. Chrestus, Aaron, Ira, Rsan and Almas took their leave, leaving myself and Gallia alone with the Roman. Chrestus had placed guards around the terrace's stone balustrade to ensure Agrippa did not assassinate us both, an entirely unnecessary precaution. I had learned long ago that whatever the Romans were, they placed great store by rules and regulations, which extended to diplomacy between themselves and foreign powers. Rome expected her envoys to be treated with civility and respect and accorded foreign diplomats the same courtesy. That is why Agrippa would never attempt anything clandestine, and I in turn would never harm a hair on his head. It was also why I disliked the idea of assassins so much, for their base actions chipped away at the very edifice of civilisation.

Ashk took the Roman's cloak before he seated himself and enquired if he wanted to retire to his bedchamber to rest. Agrippa told him he was not in need of sleep. I noticed the gold brooch on the red cloak, which was decorated with a scarab motif.

I pointed at it. 'An Egyptian design, I believe.'

'You have a keen eye, majesty' said Agrippa, accepting a silver rhyton of wine from a female servant. 'It was a gift from Augustus after the successful conclusion of the Egyptian campaign against Mark Antony and Cleopatra.'

'Did you ever meet her?' asked Gallia.

Agrippa smiled when he tasted the quality of the wine.

'Cleopatra? A few times, majesty.'

Gallia was intrigued. 'What was she like?'

'Devious, untrustworthy and a corrupter of men,' he replied bluntly. 'Because of her, Rome was wracked by civil strife for years.'

Gallia caught my eye. Rome's internal strife had been to Parthia's gain, and we both wondered what new challenges a united Roman world would pose to the empire. Gallia grabbed the bull by the horns.

'Parthia wonders if a united Rome will once again seek to expand its eastern frontier at the expense of Parthia.'

‘Caesar Augustus has stated that the Euphrates is the permanent boundary between Rome and Parthia, majesty,’ said Agrippa, ‘and does not wish to jeopardise the peace that now exists between the two.’

‘If you have come to Dura to hasten the return of the eagles lost at Carrhae and Lake Urmia, you should know that Dura, or its king, has withdrawn from the politics of the empire,’ I told him.

‘I am not here concerning the eagles, majesty,’ he replied.

‘Then what?’

‘Satrap Kewab, majesty.’

Gallia’s mask of civility slipped.

‘Kewab is under Dura’s protection and is not answerable to Rome’s laws.’

‘You misunderstand me, majesty,’ said Agrippa in haste. ‘I am not here for justice against Satrap Kewab but am authorised to offer him the post of governor of Egypt on behalf of Augustus Caesar.’

I nearly spilt my wine and Gallia’s jaw dropped in astonishment.

‘I believe that the satrap is currently without an official position,’ added Agrippa, ‘having been relieved of his duties by King of Kings Phraates.’

I should have been annoyed at this Roman who had dared to step into my kingdom to try to steal one of its jewels. But I had to admit it made perfect sense. For years Parthia had been watching and studying Rome and its leaders as a way of preparing for any threats that might appear on its western frontier. And Rome had been studying us. Alcaeus had remarked that Kewab had become the talk of the eastern Roman world, and word of his military prowess had obviously reached Rome itself. The Romans must have known Kewab had been dismissed from his position as lord high general in the east and Satrap of Aria, that kingdom now ruled by King Altan, much to my regret. And whereas Phraates had created Kewab deputy lord high general during the recent campaign against the enemies of Gordyene, it was only because the incumbent lord high general, King Ali of Atropaiene, had been unable to take the field on account of his broken ankle. I gave Agrippa a knowing look. He knew, as did I, that Kewab was a man without a real position, a satrap without a land to rule and lord of a town that was in a foreign land.

‘Kewab fled Egypt to seek sanctuary in Parthia,’ said Gallia. ‘Why would he want to return to a land where there is a price on his head?’

‘You are alluding to a time when Egypt was devoid of law and order, majesty,’ smiled Agrippa, ‘when civil strife between Cleopatra and her brother Ptolemy over who would be

pharaoh resulted in much bloodshed. Fortunately, both are dead, and Egypt is under the firm rule of Rome.'

'That being the case, why would Rome wish a Parthian general to be placed in charge of its province?' asked Gallia.

'Augustus believes an Egyptian in charge of Egypt would facilitate a peaceful and prosperous province,' said Agrippa. 'Moreover, a man with Kewab's reputation would act as a deterrent to those thinking of inciting rebellion.'

'Kewab has explained to me how his father was murdered on the orders of the younger sister of Cleopatra, whose name escapes me,' I said.

'Arsinoe,' offered Agrippa.

'Yes, that's her,' I nodded. 'At the time of his murder, Kewab's father was besieging the palace in Alexandria where Cleopatra and Julius Caesar were in residence.'

Agrippa nodded. 'Yes, majesty.'

'And if I am not mistaken,' I continued, 'was not Julius Caesar the great-uncle of your master, Augustus Caesar?'

'Yes, majesty.'

I took a sip of wine. 'And Augustus Caesar would have no objection to an enemy of his uncle ruling Egypt in his name?'

'Caesar wishes to draw a line under the past, majesty, to put in place measures that will secure the future rather than rake over what has passed.'

'Very noble,' said Gallia. 'But why have you yourself bothered to journey here, when a simple letter to Kewab would have sufficed?'

'Not that we are not happy to see you, Marcus,' I quickly added. 'It cheers me that Romans and Parthians can enjoy each other's company.'

Agrippa smiled at Gallia. 'Out of courtesy and respect for the rulers of Dura. Caesar, and I concurred, was adamant that all dealings with regard to Satrap Kewab should be conducted openly and honestly, in the spirit of the healthy relations that now exist between Rome and Parthia.'

I raised my rhyton to him. 'And Dura both appreciates and respects the forthrightness Augustus Caesar has displayed in this matter.'

Agrippa was the consummate diplomat, never once mentioning the fact both I and Gallia had once been slaves in Italy, never referring to our participation in the Spartacus uprising, or the Servile War as the Romans termed it. He was at all times polite and made great efforts to be a considerate guest, his charm and good manners winning over Gallia, which was no small feat in

itself. I sent a courier to Mari to bring Kewab back to the city. He had taken an interest in the rebuilding works, which allowed him to be near the troops he had brought with him from the east. Because Dura did not have an army of slaves to call upon, the laborious task of producing mud-bricks had to be undertaken by Kewab's troops and the exiles from Mesene. But as they were making what would be the bricks for their own homes, there was a general dearth of grumbling. The huge building project also kept thousands of men fully occupied and was a way of integrating them smoothly into the kingdom.

The process of making mud-bricks was simple enough, though messy and time-consuming. Soil and water were mixed to produce a thick mud, to which was added chopped straw. The composite mixture was then kneaded by feet for up to four days, after which it was left alone for another four days. The mixture was then poured into moulds and left for a while before being deposited on a drying floor sprinkled with sand and straw to prevent them sticking. After a week of drying, they were ready to be used as bricks for building or repairs.

While we waited for Kewab's return, I showed Agrippa around Dura. For a man used to living in Rome, Alexandria and Athens, my city must have been a disappointment. But if it was, he never let it show. He was clearly impressed by the size of the caravan park immediately north of the city, which was always full of camel caravans travelling east and west. We rode to the park the day after Agrippa had arrived and before he was due to meet Kewab that afternoon. As well as the guards employed by the caravan bosses themselves, the area was patrolled by Chrestus' legionaries to maintain law and order.

It was like a small city beside the larger one of stone and mud-bricks where I lived, a sprawl of tents, camels, horses, bored and irritable guards and equally flustered camel drivers. Swarming around them and their animals was a small army of traders offering food, clothes and tickets to the city brothels, government officials charging fees, and squads of soldiers patrolling the chaos.

'It is a curious thing,' said Agrippa, looking around the caravan park. 'All I see is camels, tents, people and horses, majesty, and yet within this park is the great wealth that has made your kingdom rich.'

I nodded. 'It is ironic the commodity for which there is an insatiable demand in Egypt, Parthia and the Roman world is light, compact and ideally suited to long-distance transportation.'

I pointed at the tents. 'The silk is stored in the living quarters whilst in the park and carried on camels when on the move. The caravans also transport dyes, precious stones, spices and medicines, all items that are relatively easy to transport on the backs of camels.'

'Do you levy tariffs on each commodity, majesty?'

I shook my head. 'We do not interfere with or examine the goods transported by the caravans, and neither do the other kingdoms the caravans pass through.'

He looked perplexed. 'Then how does Dura make money?'

'It charges a fee for every animal quartered in the park, and all traders selling their wares in the park are required to purchase business licences from the city authorities beforehand.'

'Each stopping place charges similar fees?'

I nodded.

'It must cost a great deal to transport silk from China to the Mediterranean.'

'It does,' I said. 'But consider this. Each of my wife's bodyguards, the Amazons, wears a simple white sleeveless silk vest beneath her tunic. If she had to purchase the vest, it would cost her a year's wages. And that is for a very basic garment. Those worn by the fine ladies of Egypt and Rome, not to mention their husbands, can cost four or five times that amount. The caravan bosses do not starve.'

'May I ask why the queen's bodyguards wear silk, majesty?'

'As a defence against arrows,' I told him. 'If an arrowhead pierces their mail armour, the silk makes it easier to extract from the torso. An arrow spins in flight, you see, and the silk would not tear but rather wraps itself around the metal head, thus making it easier to extract it from any wound cleanly.'

He sat still in the saddle, pondering what I had told him, around us the bustle, noise and pungent aromas of Dura's caravan park. Our horse archer escort swatted away flies from their faces, their horses using their tails to flick away the winged irritants.

'There is another matter I wish to speak to you about, majesty,' he said at last, 'a rather delicate matter.'

'Go on.'

'Caesar is most troubled by the behaviour of Gordyene, majesty, specifically its king. Whereas no one blames King Castus for defending his kingdom against the aggression of Pontus, Cappadocia and Galatia, he is concerned King Castus will take advantage of the current weakness of those kingdoms and launch a fresh war against Rome's allies.'

I smiled. 'You need not have any worry on that account, Marcus,' I reassured him. 'King Castus will only send his soldiers beyond his borders if he is provoked.'

I told him the story of how Prince Haytham had become gravely ill after his father, King Spartacus, had annexed northern Media, and how Claudia had travelled to Gordyene and explained the legend of the lion called Gordis, and how she had cured Haytham.

Agrippa was fascinated. 'How did she cure him, majesty?'

‘With pen and parchment, I believe.’

‘I do not understand.’

‘She persuaded Spartacus to write an order recalling all his soldiers from northern Media and got his pledge that he would never again try to expand Gordyene at the expense of that kingdom.’

‘What happened?’

‘The soldiers returned to Gordyene and Prince Haytham recovered,’ I replied.

‘I have heard your daughter is a powerful sorceress, majesty.’

‘Please inform Caesar that he should not worry himself unduly about Gordyene,’ I said, changing the subject. ‘Custus will not seek to expand the frontiers of his kingdom. Besides, he has a wedding to look forward to.’

‘A wedding?’

‘I hear he is to marry the daughter of King Ali of Atropaiene, which should swell Gordyene’s coffers. The princess will command a big dowry.’

Agrippa looked around the caravan park.

‘King Castus must now be one of the wealthiest kings in Parthia, majesty. His recent campaign won him not only a great victory, but also twenty-five thousand talents of gold.’

I looked at him in amazement. ‘That much?’

‘The price of convincing him to retire from Melitene cost Cappadocia, Pontus and Galatia a combined total of twenty thousand talents, majesty, plus the five thousand talents King Artaxias of Armenia paid to Gordyene to keep the peace.’

Twenty-five talents of gold – equivalent to seven hundred and fifty tons of the precious metal – was a huge sum. I worried that a young king with a victorious army and a full treasury might be tempted into rashness. Perhaps wiser heads would prevail. I prayed to Shamash it would be so.

I began coughing when a gust of wind blew dust into our faces. I turned Horns.

‘I think we should get back to the palace, Marcus, before we begin to reek of horse and camel dung.’

He wheeled his horse around and rode beside me as we trotted from the park.

‘What is done, with all the dung, I mean?’

I laughed. ‘Romans are a most practical people. It is collected and the horse dung is sold as fertilizer, the camel dung is left out in the sun to dry it before being used as a substitute for firewood.’

At the Palmyrene Gate there was the usual press of people, carts, donkeys, camels and horses either exiting or entering the city, the vine cane of a hot and humourless centurion directing traffic. The commander of our escort rode forward and began shouting.

‘Make way for the king, make way for the king.’

But he had difficulty making himself heard above the cacophony of raised voices, camels bellowing, roaring and bleating, and the braying of donkeys.

‘The sights and sounds of prosperity, Marcus,’ I shouted. ‘It was very different when I first arrived at Dura all those years ago.’

I pointed up at the walls. ‘The first person I met upon arrival was the city governor, whose body was hanging from the walls. The gates were closed, and nothing stirred. Would you like to take a closer look?’

‘Majesty?’

I pointed up at the stone statue above the gates.

‘Very much so, majesty.’

We left the horses with the commander of the escort and made our way on foot through the slow-moving throng, the centurion spotting me and ordering half a dozen of his men to close around us. As soon as I was recognised, people tried to crowd round me, not with ill intent but to wish me well and savour the moment of being within touching distance of their king. Kings and queens were for the most part remote figures who rode on horses surrounded by guards and lived in walled palaces high above the general populace. The idea of being in close proximity of the common people filled them and their nobles with dread, not least because if they were unpopular, they risked being assassinated. There was also the chance of becoming infected with some sort of dreadful disease from those who did not have access to doctors, medicines, baths, clean clothes and fresh bedding. Having spent weeks as a stinking, barefoot slave and three years in the company of a slave army, being close to commoners never troubled me. The same could not be said of Agrippa, who looked genuinely alarmed at the wall of smiling, filthy, misshapen faces that surrounded us.

His calm demeanour returned once we had ascended the steps to take us above the gates where the stone griffin stood gazing to the west, keeping watch over the road that led to Palmyra, the highway that gave Dura its great wealth. Protected day and night by four guards standing at each corner of the stone plinth on which it rested, the griffin was the silent guardian of the city and kingdom.

Agrippa ran a hand over the stone.

‘It is a curious thing. Before this statue was carved, it was just a block of stone. And now it is a sacred totem, a symbol of Dura’s strength and prosperity.’

‘We are all mere superstitious mortals, Marcus,’ I said. I pointed to the dagger in a sheath at his hip, the only weapon he carried.

‘May I look at your dagger?’

He pulled it from the sheath and handed it to me. It was a simple affair with a triangular-shaped blade, brass hilt, wooden grip and brass pommel.

‘A parazonium dagger, as carried by the Goddess Virtus, I believe, who presides over bravery and military strength. A small, insignificant weapon but one with enormous symbolism.’

He was delighted. ‘How knowledgeable you are, majesty.’

I handed it back to him. ‘Those who carry it are associated with might and leadership,’ I said, ‘and hope to be blessed with the qualities of the goddess. We are all toys of the gods, Marcus.’

That afternoon Kewab returned to the city and Marcus met with him to discuss him becoming governor of Egypt. I was determined that Parthia would not lose such a valuable son but was equally determined to play a subtle game with regard to Agrippa and his master’s offer. I might yet persuade Kewab to stay in Parthia, but I had reckoned without the influence of Menwi, his wife.