

Chapter 1

Sitting in silence they ate their meal, huddled round a campfire in one of the long-abandoned small caves where once a family had lived. Flames cast a red glow on the occupants, all wearing capes despite the fire, for the wind had picked up. It was cold in the mountains and there was no longer a door to the cave. They had killed a mountain goat earlier and were feasting on its flesh, the youngest member of the party greedily eating the juicy meat. He had yet to grow his first beard, his youthful face contrasting sharply with the haggard visage, wild hair and beard of the man sitting next to him, who was impersonating an individual who had not eaten in days. He nudged the young man and smiled, meat juices dripping on to his beard. The youth smiled back.

Across from them a middle-aged man with a weathered face and brown, thinning hair laced with grey, observed them with tired eyes, giving a mild shake of his head. He had not approved of the mission they were on and thought even less of dragging the king's eldest son along. But his lord had been insistent as soon as he had been told of a great treasure within striking distance. The mission was both to acquire the means to purchase the goods he desired, and to blood his son in what he believed would be an easy victory. If the older man had learned anything these past years it was no victory was easy, and certainly not one guaranteed to offend the gods.

The youth looked at the powerfully built man opposite, with his square jaw and thick neck, studying him.

‘Not hungry, father?’

The man with the wild hair stopped his gorging and tossed a water bottle to the boy's father.

‘Have some of this, lord, it will warm your insides.’

The man caught the water bottle, removed the cork plug and took a swig. He was delighted to discover it was wine, and good wine at that. He took another swig, replaced the cork and threw the water bottle back to its owner.

‘Been robbing the wine cellars of the nobility, Spadines?’

The owner of the wild beard gave him an impious grin but did not answer. He was the leader of the Aorsi tribe, part of the Sarmatian race, which inhabited the northern borderlands of the Kingdom of Gordyene, though his people were not averse to encroaching on the lands of that realm's northern neighbour, Armenia. The Aorsi had lived in the borderlands for over twenty years, having been invited from their domain around the Caspian Sea by a former ruler of Gordyene – King Surena. The current king of Gordyene drew his sword from its scabbard and

began cleaning the blade with a cloth. It was a fine sword, beautifully balanced with a long, straight, double-edged blade, a steel cross-guard, a grip wrapped in black leather strips and a silver pommel in the shape of a horse's head.

He thought about Surena often, about how he had defeated the Romans to free Gordyene, had been rewarded by King of Kings Orodes with the crown of the kingdom, and how the same high king had led an army against him to depose and kill him. The Parthian Empire had regarded Surena as an upstart who had grown too ambitious and had to be removed. But the people of Gordyene remembered the man who had freed them of Roman tyranny with affection. He too remembered the man who had come from the marshes south of Uruk with fondness, though he had been a callow youth when Surena had helped King Pacorus inflict a heavy defeat on the Romans at Carrhae. How he would love to inflict a similar loss on Rome.

He had taken part in the campaign against Mark Antony when his uncle had marshalled Parthian forces excellently to relieve the besieged city of Phraaspa and harry the Romans all the way back to the Armenian border. The Romans had lost many men and most of their supplies but it was only a half-victory. Mark Antony still lived, King Artavasdes still lived and most of his Armenian army was intact, and while northern Media was littered with the bones of thousands of Roman legionaries, the Romans still had many soldiers in Syria, Cilicia, Pontus and Cappadocia. He would have fought the campaign against Mark Antony differently, but then King of Kings Phraates did not hold him in high esteem. He wiped the blade without thinking, dreaming about a world free of Romans.

'You will keep your fine sword, lord?' asked Spadines.

Spartacus heard the voice but did not discern the words.

'What?'

'Your sword, you will keep it? It is a beautiful weapon.'

'Why wouldn't I?'

Spadines grinned to reveal brown, uneven teeth. 'When you purchase your new swords, you will surely want one?'

Spartacus smiled. 'They are too precious to be wasted on a king.'

The other man tossed the leg of meat he had been chewing on into the flames, sparks shooting over Spadines. He did not look up as he cleared his throat. Spartacus' smile disappeared.

'Lord Hovik thinks our plan is a bad one. Is that not right, Hovik?'

'It is not my place to comment, majesty,' replied the army's commander.

'You don't have to, it's written all over your face.'

The boy looked nervously at his father and the commander of his army, catching the king's eye.

'What about you?' snapped Spartacus. But his son had nothing to say, casting his eyes down.

Spadines took a swig of wine. A gust of wind entered the cave and fanned the flames of the fire. Spadines tossed a couple of logs on the flames.

'It is always cooler in the mountains. I hope these swords are as good as you believe they are, lord.'

Spartacus turned his gaze away from his son. 'I have seen them at work, Spadines. I saw the cataphracts of Hatra literally hack their way through Kushan swords, armour and helmets, each of the heavy horsemen armed with an ukku blade. The metal is truly a wonder.'

'A gold bar for each sword blade is a high price to pay, majesty,' cautioned Hovik, 'and I hope where we are going has enough gold to purchase the five hundred you require, for surely as night follows day there will be a heavy price to pay for our actions.'

Spartacus heard the nervousness in the voice of his commander. Hovik was a good man, perhaps too cautious but a diligent and honourable man, nonetheless. When old King Balas had been killed fighting beside Tigranes the Great, in the days when Gordyene and Armenia had been allies, most of the kingdom's nobles had died alongside their king. This had left Gordyene leaderless when the Romans had marched in, but it also meant those of low birth but with talent could rise when Surena had wrested Gordyene from Rome's grasp. So had it been with Hovik's family, his father having been a lowly spearman in Balas' army. Now his son was general of Gordyene's army. Despite their frequent disagreements, Spartacus felt at ease in his company, as he did in that of Spadines, though the roisterer drove him to distraction at times.

'Armenia is weak,' said Spartacus, 'it will do nothing.'

He pointed at Spadines. 'How long has the Aorsi raided Armenian lands? And what have the Armenians done? Nothing.'

Spadines grinned at the king. The youth looked around the cave.

'Did you raid this village, Lord Spadines?'

The Sarmatian put an arm around his shoulders. 'We never make war on innocent civilians, young prince.'

'What about those civilians who aren't innocent?' queried Hovik.

Spadines grinned. 'They are fair game.'

Fair game for taking and selling as slaves, for raping and abusing. Spartacus knew what went on just beyond his northern border but turned a blind eye to it. That was the price he paid

for having eyes and ears in the north. The Aorsi were the shield that kept his kingdom safe and provided him with information regarding the Armenians. They and their king had deserted Mark Antony after the Parthian victory at Lake Urmia, during which the army led by his uncle had taken two Roman eagles. The flight of the Armenians had convinced him Artavasdes and his army were weak.

‘The Romans probably burnt this village,’ he told his son, ‘they destroy everything they touch.’

His son looked around at the cold cavern, which had once been inhabited for perhaps hundreds of years but was now home only to animals and birds. Just one cave village among many now abandoned because of the simmering hostility between Armenia and Gordyene.

Spartacus looked at his son. ‘There was once a time when the Armenian Empire ran from the shores of the Caspian to the waters of the Mediterranean. But no longer, and do you know why?’

‘No, father.’

‘Because the Armenians allowed themselves to become the slaves of Rome.’

Slavery. It was a word and notion that haunted the strapping King of Gordyene. He had grown up in the lap of luxury, a prince of the city of Hatra, which was the jewel in the crown of the Parthian Empire. He was tutored by Greek scholars, had worn rich apparel and eaten the finest food. And yet from an early age he knew the truth of his lineage: that he was the son of the slave general Spartacus who had died in a battle in Italy, in a place called the Silarus Valley. His adoptive parents, King Gafarn and Queen Diana, also slaves, had at first been resented by the nobility of Hatra who were appalled that the former slave of Prince Pacorus now ruled over them. The prince had left the city to rule the Kingdom of Dura, a wild frontier realm where the high king of the empire exiled troublemakers and oddballs.

Life had been hard for young Spartacus, his contemporaries mocking him for his low birth and calling him *servus* – slave – to his face. This had two consequences. Firstly, it made him angry and quick to resort to violence, resulting in many fine young Parthian nobles having their noses broken and their faces bloodied. Secondly, it made Spartacus vow to himself he would never deny his heritage and would discover as much as possible about his birth parents. In this he was aided by the king and queen who regaled him with stories of Spartacus, his wife Claudia and their role in the slave war. He talked often with the Companions, the name given to those who had fought in Italy and returned to Parthia with his uncle King Pacorus, about the leader of the slave revolt. He learned how his natural father, a Thracian, had adopted the fighting techniques of the Romans to achieve victory after victory. In this way, he attained an intimate knowledge of

Roman tactics, the more so when he lived for a while at Dura, home to two legions modelled on their Roman counterparts. He even put aside his hatred for Rome to spend time with the commander of those legions, the Roman Lucius Domitus. He smiled when he remembered the time he had tried to run through the commander of Dura's army with his sword, only for the squat Roman to give him a thrashing with his vine cane.

So Spartacus had learned to control his temper and acquire as much knowledge as possible about military strategy, tactics and logistics. He was ecstatic when King of Kings Orodes handed him the crown of Gordyene, a wild, rugged kingdom somewhat cut off from the rest of the Parthian Empire. It was also a poor kingdom, unlike Hatra or Dura, both of which benefited enormously from the Silk Road bringing silk from China to dress the fine men and ladies of Parthia, Rome and Egypt. The customs' dues paid by the unending stream of camel caravans criss-crossing those kingdoms made them rich. And that wealth had allowed Dura to equip a thousand cataphracts with ukku swords.

'And a weak animal is prey for vultures,' grinned Spadines.

'Gordyene is not a vulture,' stated Hovik forcefully.

Spadines gave him a nonchalant shrug. 'I was speaking, how you say...'

'Figuratively,' said Spartacus.

Spadines nodded. 'That's the word.'

'Do you wish to conquer Armenia, father?' asked the boy.

'No, Akmon. I wish to deter any aggressors from attacking my kingdom, which one day will be yours.'

His oldest son was named after a man he felt he knew intimately, even though he had been killed before he had been born. Akmon had been a squat, rock-like Thracian who had been his natural father's second-in-command. His son was very different: tall, lean and handsome. Lucius Domitus had once told him the original Akmon had resembled a heavy-set demon with his stubby arms and scarred face, but was a fearsome fighter.

'Get some sleep,' he told his son, 'tomorrow will be a long day.'

When dawn broke soldiers were already saddling horses, a light mist dampening men and beasts alike and causing the temperature to drop. The mountains around the village were wreathed in grey clouds threatening rain, the stream that coursed off the rocks above it icy cold to the touch. A score of lancers and the same number of horse archers, all wrapped in big, heavy hooded woollen cloaks, went about their business in silence.

Spartacus fastened the girth passing under the barrel of his horse and watched Spadines and his five Aorsi ride from the village. They were the scouts, among them a man who had been

in these parts many times over the years and was well acquainted with the mountain passes and deep gorges of this part of southern Armenia. He was the one who was leading the king and his men to the target.

‘They look ridiculous.’

Spartacus patted his horse and looked at Hovik beside him, the general staring with disgust at Spadines and his men, all wearing captured Roman legionary mail armour and a mix of centurion and officer helmets. The crests were damaged or had been removed and all the helmets needed a good polish. The captured Roman armour had been gifted to the Aorsi by Spartacus following the victory at Lake Urmia, a gesture much appreciated among the Sarmatians.

‘They are certainly distinctive,’ replied his king.

Hovik watched the line of packhorses being untethered.

‘Are you certain about this, majesty?’

Spartacus vaulted into the saddle. ‘Quite certain. We are not turning back now.’

The column threaded its way through terrain covered in oak, beech, pines, hornbeam, linden, maple, ash and birch, though many of the extensive forests were hidden from view by low-hanging clouds. It was still autumn but the signs of the approaching winter were all around – the leaves of deciduous trees creating a red and orange carpet on the ground.

They rode north all morning, threading their way through a river gorge covered by pine, oak and elm. The sun never showed its face and as the morning wore on the mist gave way to a light drizzle, which combined with a gentle northerly wind, soaked and chilled everyone. The mood of the column grew more morose when the king forbade the lighting of any fires to cook a midday meal for fear of alerting any Armenians in the area. But they saw no one, no animals or birds, and as they plodded on some began to think they had left the world to enter a cold, grey hell. But in the mid-afternoon, the rain having finally stopped, they left the forest to ascend towards a basalt plateau where their destination was located.

Spadines’ scout reported to the king with his lord as the party halted in a treeless ravine a short distance from the track. The trees were sparser now and the ground increasingly rock-scarred. But the wind was sharper making the air much cooler.

‘We are five miles away, lord,’ the scout told Spartacus.

‘How many guards?’ asked the king.

‘Always two at the gates but more inside.’

Hovik frowned. ‘That makes no sense. There are surely more manning the walls.’

‘No, lord,’ the scout reassured him, ‘most guards are inside to keep control of the crowds.’

‘And how crowded will it be?’ asked Spartacus.

The man looked up at the leaden sky. ‘It is very crowded during the summer festival. But now, with the approach of winter, numbers fall away.’

Spartacus looked at the Sarmatian. ‘And this track leads directly to it?’

The scout nodded. The king turned to Hovik.

‘Fetch him.’

Hovik turned but hesitated, swivelling to face his king.

‘Are you certain about this, lord? It is not too late to turn back.’

‘What? With a great prize within our grasp. Fortune favours the bold, Hovik. Just make sure you arrive on time. We will not have an inexhaustible supply of arrows.’

A troubled Hovik departed to return moments later with a slim individual in his twenties, his hair and beard as black as night.

‘This is Kuris, majesty,’ said Hovik.

Spartacus looked at the soldier. ‘Your general tells me you are the best shot in the whole army.’

‘General Hovik does me great honour, majesty,’ Kuris replied.

‘You are not worried about angering the gods?’

Kuris stared ahead. ‘The gods of Armenia are not my gods, majesty.’

‘And who is your god?’

‘Teshub, majesty, god of the sky, weather and storms.’

Spartacus looked at his sodden cloak. ‘He is certainly with us today, it would seem.’

The king swapped his helmet for a soft, pointed hat worn by all Gordyene’s horse archers. The blanket draped over his saddle hid the case fastened to it containing his recurve bow. His quiver holding thirty arrows was slung on his back under his cloak. The two gained their saddles and nudged their horses forward.

‘Obey General Hovik,’ Spartacus instructed his son, ‘and ignore Lord Spadines.’

‘The gods be with you, lord,’ grinned Spadines, nudging Akmon and winking.

The king and his companion rode into a wind gaining in strength as they continued to climb the track, eventually reaching the plateau that gave breath-taking views of the surrounding mountains, all now topped with snow. They saw no other travellers, leading Spartacus to believe that Spadines’ scout knew what he was talking about. Hopefully he would also be right about the number of guards at the gates.

‘You were at Lake Urmia?’ asked Spartacus.

‘Yes, majesty,’ answered Kuris, ‘I used many arrows.’

‘Let’s hope you won’t have to use many today. How many gold arrows do you possess?’

‘Three, majesty.’

Spartacus smiled to himself. Every year the kingdom held an archery competition open to everyone, regardless of sex, rank or civilian or military status. The only exceptions were the king and queen because if they were beaten it would damage their regal aura, or so their advisers told them. The winner was awarded a gold arrow and for Kuris to possess three was an indication of his expertise with a bow. The riches he and his king were about to steal would provide enough gold to create a thousand gold arrows.

Both had been riding with their heads bowed and hoods over their hats as a defence against the now biting wind, but when the king looked up he saw it. The temple of the Goddess Anahit. Sitting on the edge of a precipice with sheer rock walls dropping hundreds of feet to the river below, the edge of the plateau protected the temple on two sides. A high, thick stone wall shielded the other sides with small round towers along its length, giving sentries views of any approaching hostile force. But the only travellers nearing the temple of the Goddess of Fertility and Birth were two forlorn figures on horseback and a group on foot.

‘When we reach the gate, I’ll drop any at ground level,’ said Spartacus, ‘you get yourself on the wall.’

Kuris nodded as they passed a group of women on foot, all wrapped in thick cloaks with hoods and all chanting prayers to the goddess they had come to pray and give offerings to. Spartacus shook his head in despair at the desperate wretches.

‘Don’t waste your arrows killing worshippers,’ were his final words to Kuris as they jumped down from their horses to enter the temple grounds. The gate was only wide enough for two people abreast to enter and was only just over the height of a man to bar a rider on a horse. The gate looked very small set in the wall that must have been at least twenty feet high, the two guards standing above it eyeing Spartacus and Kuris as they led their horses towards them. Another sentry armed with a spear and shield bearing the ancient Armenian symbol of the Tree of Life held up a hand to them.

‘Greetings, friend,’ smiled Spartacus.

The guard eyed them, examining their cloaked frames and seeing the tips of their scabbards beneath the heavy wool shawls. He levelled his spear and called forward one of his comrades.

‘Why the hostility, friend?’ queried Spartacus. ‘We come in peace.’

‘Why are you armed?’ asked the guard.

Spartacus held out his left palm, in which were several gold coins.

‘We have come to make an offering to the goddess. We are armed because there are many dangers on the road.’

The guard peered at the gold coins, his eyes bulging in surprise when the dagger was plunged through his throat. Spartacus released the dagger, tossed his cloak aside and drew his sword to charge the second guard, brushing aside the spear blade to thrust the point of his blade into the man’s eye socket. The weight behind the blow meant the point exited the man’s skull and got stuck in the back of the iron helmet. Spartacus yanked back the sword but it would not budge.

‘Shit.’ He turned to Kuris. ‘Move!’

The archer pulled his bow from its case and raced past his king, nocking an arrow in the bowstring. He spun, took aim and shot the arrow hitting one of the men on the rampart, who crumpled on to the walkway. The other sentry raised his spear to throw at Kuris but the treble golden arrow winner had already strung a fresh arrow and released the bowstring before the temple guard had drawn back his arm. The spear clattered on the walkway as he doubled up in excruciating pain, the three-winged arrow having skewered his genitals.

Kuris ran up the stone steps a few paces from the gate and prepared to fight off the other temple guards he knew would come. Sure enough, the wails and screams of the pilgrims they had passed filling the air, a bell sounded and within half a minute at least a dozen temple guards were bounding towards the compound’s entrance. Spartacus had managed to wrench his sword free from its gory vice and now ran with bow in hand to stand beside his subject.

For Kuris it was all so easy, honed by years of hunting with his father in the mountains around Vanadzor, during which he had learned all the properties and deficiencies of bows and the missiles they shot. He learned how windage affected a shot, how far an arrow travelled in a straight line before dropping, how to measure trajectory to ensure an arrow struck its target, and how to ignore the distractions of charging wolves, boar and the unnerving chaos of battle to focus on a solitary target and kill it. So it was now as he released the bowstring to strike a temple guard at over fifty paces away, the man collapsing in a heap as the arrow pierced his chest.

The temple guards stopped, an officer bellowing orders at them to close ranks. They crouched, presented a wall of shields and began to shuffle forward, heads tight to the top rim of the shields to protect their faces. Kuris took another arrow from his quiver, nocked it, drew back the bowstring and let the sinew slip from his fingers. There was a scream as the temple guard on the far right of the line was struck in the face and collapsed. He shot another arrow that felled the guard on the far left of the line, the rest of the enemy soldiers halting.

‘Good shot,’ said Spartacus.

An arrow clattered into the wall just below his feet.

‘Archers,’ hissed Kuris. ‘Keep the heads of the guards down, majesty, I will take care of them.’

The temple archers were standing in a line behind the spearmen, around sixty paces away from the wall. Around them worshippers, temple priests and servants were running as fast as they could into the temple itself, reaching it via stone steps cut into the high basalt podium on which it stood.

Kuris worked feverishly because he knew he and his king were sitting targets on the wall. He loosed ten arrows in less than a minute, half finding their targets but all keeping the heads of the enemy archers down. Spartacus was emptying his quiver shooting arrows at the temple guards huddling on the ground behind their shields. He glanced behind, over the wall. Where was Hovik?

‘I have five arrows left,’ shouted Kuris.

The king shot an arrow that thudded into a shield of a temple guard, causing him to curse in frustration. But his dissatisfaction disappeared when he heard horses’ hooves behind him and then the sound of Hovik’s voice shouting instructions to his men. The first to enter the temple compound were the horse archers, sprinting through the gate to shoot volley after volley at the line of temple guards. The Armenian line dissolved under the deluge of arrows, the survivors fleeing for their lives. Hovik was organising the score of dismounted spearmen, ordering them into a line that inched forward towards the enemy archers still shooting at the king and Kuris on the wall. They desisted when they came under the rain of arrows from the general’s dismounted horse archers.

‘Secure the compound,’ Spartacus shouted to his commander.

He bounded down the steps with Kuris following to embrace his son who was with Spadines and his men.

‘You are with me,’ he said to Akmon and the Sarmatian.

Hovik organised a sweep of the temple compound, the securing of the gate, the horses brought in, and then the entrance shut to bar any unwelcome guests. From inside the temple there came the sound of voices singing, a mournful tune imploring the Goddess Anahit to save her followers.

‘That won’t help them,’ growled Spartacus.

The temple was an impressive structure decorated with slender Ionian columns on all four sides and crowned by a roof with a triangular pediment. The pediment was decorated with carvings showing grapevines and pomegranates – traditional Armenian symbols. The tall, slender

wooden doors had been shut but though impressive to look at, with red leather facings and polished brass studs, were not designed to withstand a siege.

‘Force an entrance,’ commanded Spartacus.

While Hovik organised the capture of those temple guards still living and their incarceration in a storeroom, Spadines ordered his men to fetch something to batter down the doors. And still those inside the temple continued to sing, irritating the King of Gordyene immensely.

‘I always hated attending the Grand Temple at Hatra,’ he complained, astounded when the Sarmatians began piling firewood against the doors.

‘What are you doing?’

‘We’ll burn them out, lord,’ grinned Spadines.

‘We can’t find a battering ram,’ said another.

So they made a great pile of firewood, doused it with oil and set it alight. Soon a fire was raging, the flames licking the doors that began to peel to reveal the wood underneath. Spadines was in his element, ordering his men to throw fresh fuel on the fire rapidly licking the pediment.

‘If the roof catches alight it will collapse and kill everyone inside,’ warned Hovik, shaking his head.

‘So?’ queried Spadines.

‘So if all the priests are killed we will not know the whereabouts of the gold we came for.’

Spartacus clutched his head in despair. ‘Extinguish the fire!’

The Sarmatians and his soldiers spent the next few minutes either pulling firebrands from the inferno or throwing water on the flames. Eventually they put the fire out, leaving the doors badly scorched and the beautiful façade of the temple black.

‘Batter them in,’ commanded Spartacus.

‘At least they are no longer singing, lord,’ said Spadines.

Hovik organised a dozen of his men to manhandle an empty water trough to the temple doors, the heavy stone vessel being rammed against the barriers to open them. Screams and wails emanated from inside as a second blow effected an entry and Spartacus bounded inside. His men and the Sarmatians followed, the interior of the temple filled with the aroma of wood smoke. Four temple guards barred the king’s way but behind him archers flanking left and right, pointed their nocked arrows at them.

‘Surrender or die,’ roared the king.

They threw down their weapons, whereupon a white-robed man in his fifties marched from the altar.

‘Who are you to defile this holy place?’

Spartacus, sword in hand, squared up to him. The priest was shorter than the king with a flushed face, bushy beard and huge belly threatening to split his thick white robe.

‘Who are you?’ he demanded.

‘King Spartacus of Gordyene. And you?’

The priest stepped back, astounded, for a few seconds lost for words. Was this really the man whose Sarmatian allies terrorised the southern lands of Armenia, the man who was the son of a slave who had wreaked havoc in the heart of the Roman world before being killed? But surely even he would not defile a temple of the goddess?

‘Avag, high priest to the Great Lady. You risk eternal damnation for the horror you have committed here.’

Spartacus sheathed his sword and turned to his men. ‘Find it.’

They began ransacking the temple, oblivious to the weeping women and terrified male priests huddling together near the statue behind the altar. Spartacus saw it and stared at the golden image of the goddess. He smiled maliciously as he recognised the precious metal.

‘Take the statue,’ he commanded.

‘No!’ bellowed Avag, turning on his heels to race back to the statue of the Goddess Anahit. The younger priests linked arms in defiance to form a human chain before the altar, behind them the glaring figure of Avag. To one side around a dozen striking young women in white robes, were standing in front of the perhaps score of worshippers to protect them. Spartacus smiled when he noticed that the *hierodoulai*, the sacred slaves of the temple, were huddled against one wall out of the way. Sighing, Spartacus beckoned his son forward. Akmon was staring in wonderment at the young beauties shielding the worshippers.

‘You see how religious fervour can poison a man’s mind, Akmon?’

‘I do not understand, father.’

Spartacus unshouldered his bow and snapped his fingers for one of his men to provide him with an arrow. He knocked the missile.

‘These priests are alone and defenceless and yet they believe their god will save them.’

He pulled back the bowstring, though not to its full extent, and released it. The arrow struck one of the male priests in the shoulder, the man squealing like a cornered pig as he spun to the floor.

‘You will all stand aside or my men will cut you down,’ threatened Spartacus.

Akmon, wide-eyed, stared at the injured priest whose white robe was turning red.

‘He’ll live,’ said his father.

'You cannot take the statue,' shouted Avag.

Hovik reported to his king. 'No gold in the temple, lord, aside from the statue.'

Spartacus slapped him on the arm and stepped forward, handing his son his bow. He spread his arms.

'Before I make my demands, I would like to clarify the situation you all find yourself in. Your guards are either dead or in chains, there are no Armenian soldiers nearby and your fate lies in my hands.'

He took two steps towards the priests standing before the altar, two of whom were tending to their injured colleague.

'I know many ladies of quality come to this temple to make offerings to the goddess of fertility and birth. They make donations to the temple in the hope that by doing so Anahit will grant their desire to become mothers. This is common knowledge. So, surrender your horde of gold or face the consequences.'

Avag sneered at the demand. 'We are servants of the Lady of the Land, the Nourishing Mother, the daughter of Aramazd, the father of all the gods and goddesses and the creator of heaven and earth. You risk his wrath, slave king, for who are you but the bastard son of a slave?'

Spartacus nodded and waved over Spadines. 'Take him outside and throw him off the precipice.'

The priests, priestesses and worshippers cried out in anguish, clasping their hands to their breasts in their misery. Spadines and two of his men manhandled the high priest and dragged him towards the charred doors.

One of the priests rushed forward. Hovik, thinking he was an assassin, drew his sword and stepped in front of his king. The priest fell to his knees, his hands clasped together.

'Spare High Priest Avag, I beg you.'

Spartacus stepped in front of Hovik. 'Then tell me where the gold is.'

'Under the floor,' came the answer.

'Bring the priest back,' Spartacus called to Spadines.

The fat high priest, cursing at his subordinate, was shoved back towards the altar as Spartacus queried the young man further.

'Where under the floor?'

'Behind the altar, under the slabs behind the statute, may the goddess forgive me.'

Spartacus lifted him back to his feet. 'I'm sure she will. Take comfort in the knowledge that you have saved the lives of everyone in the temple. Remove the slabs.'

It was a rich haul, the accumulation of years of donations by Armenia's high and low. There were jewels and silver but mostly it was gold. Gold bars, gold coins, gold earrings, gold rings, gold necklaces, gold diadems and gold bracelets. It was all removed and loaded on the packhorses, much to the chagrin of the priests and priestesses who were manhandled outside to be confined in one of the stable blocks. As one of the priestesses passed Spartacus she pulled a knife from her robe and attempted to stab him in the chest, not realising his armour – rows of overlapping iron scales riveted onto a thick hide cuirass – would easily stop the blow. He stared bemused as the dagger glanced off his scale armour, knocking the blade out of the girl's hand. He gripped her by the throat. The soldiers around him began laughing as he began to choke the life out of her, her arms flailing around wildly as she struggled in vain to free herself from the king's iron grip.

'No, father,' pleaded Akmon.

'The penalty for trying to kill a king is death.'

'I plead for her life,' said Akmon, now distressed that the girl's life was hanging by a thread.

Spartacus released her and threw her to the floor. She began retching and coughing, Akmon dashing to her side to hold her hand. He wanted to hold her close but hesitated when she spat venom at his father.

'You are a blasphemer and barbarian.'

She snatched her hand away from Akmon. 'Leave me alone.'

'I preferred her when she was choking,' said Spadines.

'Are you wounded, majesty?' asked Hovik with concern.

Spartacus picked up the dagger and pointed it at the girl.

'When you try to kill a man wearing armour make sure you have a weapon that will go through metal and leather. Otherwise strike for his face.'

'My father will hunt you down and kill you,' she threatened him.

'And who is your father?'

She had regained control of her breathing and stood to face the king, her neck still red but otherwise she was unharmed. She was attractive enough, her heart-shaped face framed by a mass of chestnut curls, and when she drew herself up she was nearly as tall as Spartacus himself.

'Lord Geghard, commander of King Artavasdes' armies and one of the most powerful men in all Armenia.'

Akmon's eyes opened with surprise and admiration. Spartacus nodded.

'I knew you were nobility. Your arrogance gave you away. What is your name?'

‘Lusin.’

‘Well, Lusin, you will command a fat fee when I ransom you to your father. Take her.’

Two soldiers grabbed her arms and led her away, Lusin protesting loudly but to no avail. Akmon was delighted though his father pointed the dagger at him.

‘Don’t get any ideas. She is the enemy and her only worth is the amount of gold her father will pay me to get her back. Make yourself useful and help load the packhorses.’

A beaming Akmon followed the cursing Lusin outside.

‘Do you think stealing the daughter of Artavasdes’ general is a good idea, lord?’ queried Hovik. ‘It might incite the king to launch an invasion of Gordyene.’

Spartacus adopted a grim countenance. ‘That is the idea, general. Just as we defeated the Romans so shall we crush the Armenians. See that the gold is loaded speedily, I wish to be away from this place quickly.’

Hovik saluted and disappeared. Spartacus walked with Spadines to where the granite slabs had been lifted to reveal a wide, shallow hole where the offerings to the goddess had been secreted.

‘Keep an eye on Akmon during the ride back. Make sure he is kept away from the Armenian girl.’

‘You think she might try to kill him too, lord?’

Spartacus shook his head. ‘He likes her and she is a smart girl. She might use his fondness for her as means to make her escape.’

‘Perhaps we could cut her face up to make her less pretty,’ suggested Spadines.

Spartacus sighed. ‘Just keep Akmon away from her, and keep your men away from her as well.’

Artaxata, the capital of Armenia, was a city in shock. The first rumours were disbelieved. Everyone knew the King of Gordyene was an uncouth barbarian but even he would not desecrate a temple dedicated to the Goddess Anahit. But then official notices posted throughout the city confirmed the worst: King Spartacus and his Sarmatian bandits had plundered the temple and taken hostage the daughter of Lord Geghard, the commander of the king’s armies, fierce warlord and richest man in all Armenia. Shock gave way to anger and then a burning desire for retribution throughout the kingdom.

‘I want that bastard’s head on a spike, majesty,’ roared Geghard, to cheers and applause from the courtiers packed into the throne room, guards around the walls tapping the butts of their spears on the marble tiles to signal approval of their general’s words.

Such profanity was alien to the rich trappings of a royal palace where Greek actors, poets and writers plied their trade and noblewomen dressed in silks walked the corridors.

‘The defiling of the Temple of Anahit cannot go unpunished, majesty,’ said the high priest standing next to the ornate stone dais where King Artavasdes and Queen Satenik were sitting.

A huge banner hung from the white wall behind them, a deep crimson flag with a golden star in the centre flanked by two reverse-looking eagles, also in gold. It was the standard of the Artaxiad dynasty that had ruled Armenia for over one hundred and fifty years. Its greatest son had been Tigranes the Great, the king’s father, who had bestridden the land between the Caspian and the Mediterranean like a colossus. But even he had been defeated by the Romans and was forced to become an ally of Rome, the ramifications of which were still being felt by his son.

Artavasdes was not like his father. He was a man of learning and the arts who wrote plays in Greek and saw them performed in the city’s theatre, the first in all Armenia. He was a thinker who desired to maintain the peace and prosperity of his kingdom and its people. It was unfortunate for him, and Armenia, that his realm was in the middle of the ongoing rivalry between Rome and Parthia. He had reluctantly taken part in Mark Antony’s campaign against the Parthians, which had ended in retreat and humiliation, though not for Armenia as he had absented himself and his army following the reverse at Lake Urmia. He had hoped the Parthians would take no further action against Armenia, a forlorn wish it would appear. The last thing he wanted was a war with the newly resurgent Parthian Empire. But he had to do something.

Geghard waved a sheet of papyrus in the air. ‘This is the ransom demand from King, so-called, Spartacus. It demands my daughter’s weight in gold for her safe return.’

Groans accompanied his words, ladies shaking their heads and a few wiping away a tear from their well-manicured cheeks.

‘I demand justice,’ roared Geghard.

His name meant ‘spear’ and his words were certainly finding their mark, arousing cheers and applause from the kingdom’s nobles. Artavasdes held up a hand, the marshal of the court calling for silence. Artavasdes, resplendent in purple robes, the colour symbolising wisdom, stood and looked directly at his general.

‘We are greatly saddened by the abduction of your daughter, Lord Geghard, and will take every measure to ensure she is speedily returned to you.’

‘We can be before the walls of Vanadzor in a month, majesty,’ said Geghard, his heavy brow giving him a grim visage.

‘It shall be so,’ said the king to rapturous cheers.

Artavasdes waited for the noise to die down. ‘But not this year.’

Men glanced at each other, the High Priest of Aramazd frowned and Geghard's officers clenched their fists in anguish. The general himself kept his legendary temper under control.

'I do not understand, majesty.'

'The mountain passes are already blanketed in snow and in a month they will be closed altogether. Winter is approaching and I have no desire to lead my army to its doom, general.'

'The gods demand vengeance, highness,' said the high priest.

'And they shall have it,' promised Artavasdes, 'but next year, in the spring. In the meantime, I will pay the gold to King Spartacus to secure the release of your daughter.'

'Such a gesture will be interpreted by King Spartacus as weakness, majesty,' said Geghard.

Artavasdes nodded. 'Let him interpret it as he wishes. It does not matter. In the spring, we will march against Gordyene to punish its king for his depravity.'

He left the dais holding the hand of his queen and followed by his three children, accompanied by polite applause. The marshal of the court trailed after them, followed by the royal justices, all dressed in blue, the colour traditionally associated with justice. But in his private quarters, having removed his jewel-encrusted diadem and dismissed his attendants, Artavasdes questioned the general about the feasibility of attacking Gordyene. They sipped wine produced by the royal vineyards outside the city and reflected on the circumstances that had led to the abduction of the daughter of the kingdom's second most powerful man; the girl living in a draughty temple in the middle of nowhere. It was a long tradition that the daughters of the kingdom's most eminent families were required to serve as temporary priestesses in the realm's temples before marrying.

'What does her intended have to say about her abduction?' asked the king.

'Oh, he's spitting blood and vowing revenge,' answered Geghard, 'though he's not yet a man so he's about as much use as a blind man in an archery contest.'

He cast his head down and spoke softly. 'They say the King of Gordyene nearly choked her to death.'

'I feel your pain, lord, and in truth am only interested in getting Lusin back to you.'

Geghard, surprise in his eyes, looked up. 'Surely you want justice, majesty?'

'Justice, yes, but a war with Parthia? No.'

Artavasdes sipped at his wine. 'After the debacle of Mark Antony's invasion Armenia has a chance to finally free itself from Rome's grip. At the same time, I do not wish to embroil my kingdom in a war with those Parthians who humiliated Mark Antony.'

'Gordyene is small and weak,' sneered Geghard.

'But has powerful allies. Do not forget its king is the son of King Gafarn of Hatra and nephew of King Pacorus of Dura, who in turn can summon the aid of Mesene and Elymais if he has a mind to. Having got rid of Rome's legions I do not wish to invite Dura's to invade my kingdom.'

'So, we do nothing,' Geghard's temper was beginning to rise. His sharp cheekbones were turning red with rage.

But Artavasdes was nothing if not thoughtful.

'On the contrary, my friend, we provoke the King of Gordyene into invading Armenian where we can defeat him at a time and place of our choosing.'

