

Chapter 1

No women shed any tears in the building now. There were no longer any trembling girls forced to stand before their abusers, who were invariably fat, greedy and sadistic. The corridors were no longer filled with the grunts and groans of brutal, angry men inflicting their perversions on those forced to work within the building's perfumed, gaudily decorated rooms. The façade the establishment had presented to the world was one of a brothel that catered for every male desire, no matter how deviant. For a price. And that price was invariably high. The women who plied their trade within the brothel were ostensibly masters of their craft, females who could satisfy their male clients akin to a skilled musician playing an instrument. But the reality was that a prostitute's life was brutish and short. Many were lucky to reach their thirtieth birthday; most were dead in their twenties, their bodies worn out and broken by hard, constant use. Some succumbed to the diseases that their clients carried, dying of starvation after being thrown out of the brothel by the woman who ran the establishment with an iron fist. Diseased whores were bad for business; clients only wanted the young, the clean, and the virginal.

But now the building was free of lascivious men; indeed, all men were prohibited from entering, even the king. The rooms and corridors had been renovated and repainted, and cleansed by the prayers and incense of the high priestess of the city's Temple of Ishtar. Ishtar, the Goddess of Love, the embodiment of sexuality and fertility, but also the Lady of Battle. Ishtar was beautiful, alluring and seductive, but that was only one part of her powers. She also carried a bow and quiver and rode the night sky in a silver chariot pulled by celestial lions. The former brothel became The Sanctuary, the refuge of the Amazons, the mortal embodiment of Ishtar's qualities, the bodyguard of Queen Gallia of Dura, the famed female warrior whose exploits were well known throughout Parthia and beyond.

The queen was old now, her eyes still blue but a little world-weary. Her famous long blonde hair was streaked with grey and not as thick as when she had first become the queen of the wild outlaw city on the western bank of the River Euphrates. But she was still a forceful figure, now the veteran of many battles and campaigns fighting beside her husband. And where she went so did the Amazons, the band of sisters first formed in Italy when the queen had been fighting the Romans in the army of the slave general Spartacus. Only a handful of the first Amazons still lived and only two still rode into battle. They were Gallia and Diana, Queen of Hatra, who still rode to war alongside her husband King Gafarn. But the standards and fighting prowess of the original Amazons had been upheld by subsequent recruits to the all-female band, the current members of which stood in silence in the entrance hall of The Sanctuary. There were

always one hundred Amazons but today there were only seventy, a result of the recent campaign in Pontus and Cappadocia where Zenobia, their commander, had fallen. Minu, her replacement, stood next to the queen at the top of the grand staircase, her brown eyes scanning the women and teenage girls below. The girls were members of the Daughters of Dura, the fighting unit raised five years before when the usurper Tiridates had seized Parthia's high crown and had threatened to march on Dura itself. Gallia had raised a small force of orphan girls to supplement the Amazons, and when the emergency had passed had retained their services. Orphan girls could quickly be moulded into keen recruits and their young minds were like sponges speedily absorbing useful skills. By the time they reached adulthood they were ready to become fully fledged Amazons.

Minu was not an orphan but her lithe figure should have been showing signs of getting plumper by now as the child grew inside her. But the unborn infant had been lost during the recent campaign, a result of blows suffered at the hands of Gaul warriors. It was a loss keenly felt by both Minu and her husband Talib, the chief scout in Dura's army.

'While our enemies still live, there can be no peace for Dura,' began Gallia, examining the sea of faces below. 'While they still breathe and walk the earth they continue to pose a threat to this kingdom and the people who live in it. You may think that because they are hundreds of miles from this city, they are incapable of striking at us. But you would be wrong.

'Five years ago, when the Daughters of Dura were born in response to a grave crisis, Tiridates was the King of Aria, a land hundreds of miles to the east of Dura. And yet in no time at all he was but a stone's throw from this city. I subsequently learned he passed through Dura on his way to Syria where the Romans gave him sanctuary. And now he resides in Pontus where the Romans continue to indulge him. With him are other enemies of Dura, who at any time can unite and plot to wage war not only on this kingdom but also Parthia. I say this cannot be allowed to continue.'

She let her words sink in, noticing the nodding heads, especially among the younger members of the group.

'I am sad to say our enemies have grown emboldened by the recent campaign, during which many brave men and women fell, not least King Spartacus of Gordyene and Zenobia, your former commander. The king, my husband, greatly affected by the loss of his nephew, has declared Dura's army will not embark on another campaign beyond Parthia's borders. It is therefore left to us to avenge the loss of our sisters and brothers.'

Every head was now nodding. Every head save one. The tall, graceful Saruke, the Scythian Sister sent to Dura by Claudia, Gallia's daughter, stood impassively, a slight smile on her face.

She had been working hard to impart her knowledge to Dura's eager female recruits, and was delighted that Queen Gallia was going to put those skills into practice.

'Those responsible will pay with their lives,' said Gallia, prompting several of the girls to beam with delight. 'You may ask: who are they? I will tell you. The traitor Atrax, who was spared by Dura's king, only to repay that act of clemency with base betrayal. The Roman mercenary Titus Tullus, who wanted to crucify your king, my husband, before the walls of Irbil. The barbarian Laodice, the wild hill man of Pontus who butchered innocent civilians in Irbil. The usurper Tiridates, who threatened to burn Dura to the ground. The whore Glaphyra, who conspired with others to keep our army before the walls of Kayseri with false promises of peace before her fellow conspirators basely attacked us. Finally, Amyntas of Galatia, so-called king who murdered my friend and your commander Zenobia.

'All must die.'

It was a mix of half-truths, facts and naked lies. It was true that Atrax, only surviving son of the late, unlamented Queen Aliyeh, King Pacorus' sister, had been a thorn in the side of both Media and Parthia as a whole. His Roman-supported invasion of Media had resulted not only in Dura's king and queen narrowly escaping death when they had found themselves trapped in the kingdom's capital Irbil by Atrax's rebels, but Queen Rasha, wife of King Spartacus, had subsequently been killed on the Diyana Plain when Gordyene's army had marched to Irbil's relief. Those crimes alone would have been enough to earn Atrax a death sentence, but what really galled Gallia was that her husband had saved his life when Spartacus had earlier invaded Media, defeated its army and surrounded Irbil, where a gravely wounded Atrax was trapped. Atrax should have died in Media's capital, either from his wounds or at the hands of Spartacus' executioner. As it was, King Pacorus, honourable man that he was, persuaded Spartacus not to sack Irbil and allow the wounded Atrax to leave for Hatra. The mercy shown to him by her husband was repaid with treachery. She would not make the same mistake.

Tiridates had seized the high crown and forced King of Kings Phraates into exile, or rather to seek sanctuary with her daughter in the remote, desolate Alborz Mountains. It was irrelevant to her whether Phraates lived or died, as the king of kings had proved himself to be an untrustworthy, duplicitous snake. But in the fighting to save his hide from the hordes of Tiridates, her dear friends Nergal and Praxima had been killed. For that reason alone the former King of Aria deserved to die.

Titus Tullus had once fought alongside the King and Queen of Dura, when Gallia, Rasha and Diana had convinced Byrd to cover the costs of hiring a Roman legion to support the restoration of Phraates to the high throne. But after Tiridates had been defeated, Titus Tullus left

Parthia and found work with King Polemon of Pontus. It was Media's misfortune that he returned to Parthia as part of Prince Atrax's army of rebels, which had been financed by Octavian, the Roman leader, now called Augustus Caesar for reasons that Gallia neither understood or bothered about. It was Tullus who had organised the crucifixion of innocent civilians in Irbil to cower the defenders into surrender, and had been the chosen commander for the intended crucifixion of King Pacorus himself before the walls of Irbil's Citadel. Her husband had been rescued but that would not save Titus Tullus from death.

Laodice was the leader of the rabble of Pontic hill men that had accompanied Prince Atrax into Media, where he and they had wreaked havoc on the kingdom and its civilian population alike. For siding with Atrax he would also die.

The final two names on her death list were in a different category. Glaphyra was the mother of King Archelaus of Cappadocia, the kingdom she and the rest of the army had found themselves in after retreating south following the abortive siege of Sinope the year before. Ironically, the combined armies of Dura, Hatra and Gordyene had found themselves before the capital of Pontus out of Spartacus' desire to serve justice on those he held responsible for Rasha's death: Atrax and Titus Tullus, who were both in Sinope. However, having been warned of the approach of a relief army of Cappadocians and Galatians, the Parthians had withdrawn south into those two kingdoms. Following the death of Spartacus and the proclaiming of his son Castus as the new King of Gordyene, the Parthians had laid siege to Kayseri, the capital of Cappadocia. Glaphyra was in the city and had opened negotiations with King Pacorus, during which she agreed to pay King Castus a huge sum in gold providing the Parthians continued their march back to Parthia. Neither Pacorus nor Gafarn wished to storm a city they would have to relinquish immediately afterwards, and Castus was more than happy to swell Gordyene's treasury, so all parties were happy. But Glaphyra had merely been playing for time and was the pivotal figure in a bold plan to crush the Parthians in an attack by no less than four separate armies. It was only due to the genius of Kewab, former Satrap of Aria, that the Parthians not only survived but triumphed in the Battle of Kayseri. But for her deception, Glaphyra would pay with her life.

Finally, there was Amyntas, King of Galatia, a strange kingdom inhabited by Gauls. Like many men of his race, Amyntas was loud, boorish, big and violent. He had threatened to kill Pacorus and *had* killed Zenobia and Minu's unborn child. He deserved death not only for those crimes, but also for being the embodiment of everything Gallia despised about her own race.

When the queen had finished speaking her audience as one said, 'all must die'. Gallia smiled and dismissed the assembly, catching Minu's eye and nodding as the crowd dispersed.

The commander of the Amazons brought Haya to the ground-floor meeting room, the walls of which had previously been decorated with images of naked women performing sexual acts, but were now a pristine white, having been repainted with several coats to erase the offensive images.

Haya, lithe, tall, her dark brown hair tumbling to her shoulders, stood at attention before the queen, Minu by her side. Gallia poured wine into a silver chalice engraved with the motto of the Amazons and handed it to her.

‘Take the weight off your feet,’ she told the young woman.

Gallia poured Minu and herself some wine before all three sat on the plush couches, the wooden feet of which had been carved to resemble a griffin’s paws. Gallia held up her chalice to Haya.

‘You have been selected to be one of those who will serve justice on Dura’s enemies, Haya.’

The young woman’s brown eyes lit up. ‘It will be an honour, majesty.’

‘Before you leave, however,’ continued the queen, ‘I have another important mission for you.’

The winter months were pleasant enough in the Kingdom of Dura. They were still warm and mostly dry, but not as extreme as the hot days of summer when the wind could resemble a gust from a furnace. This was a blessing for the kingdom’s farmers, who laboured long and hard to prepare their fields for the harvest that would take place in mid-spring to early summer. The land had to be ploughed, watered, weeded and protected against locusts and other pests, such as flocks of hungry birds. It was back-breaking work and continued from dawn till dusk, though at least the king in his palace in the city had taken measures to ease their burden. He, or rather his soldiers and engineers, had built canals, dams and irrigation ditches to bring water from the mighty Euphrates to nourish the bone-dry earth adjacent to it. The river rose in early spring, swollen by melt waters from the north. But instead of flooding the land, the kingdom’s irrigation system both prevented the river from breaking its banks, and also drew water from the Euphrates to fill the many inland dams. It was a marvel to behold and resulted in the desert south of the city turning green as crops grew in the fields.

‘Kill it, lord.’

Cambiz, the grizzled old farm hand with calloused hands, a leering visage and sinewy arms and legs turned black by years of being exposed to a harsh Mesopotamian sun, was pointing at an Egyptian vulture picking at something on the dirt track. Either side were fields containing neat lines of ploughed earth.

Klietas shook his head. 'No, it is not eating any seeds, it is picking at dung.'

Cambiz glanced at the sling tucked into his young master's belt and rubbed his hands.

'Mind if I take a shot, lord?'

Klietas flashed a smile. 'We are not killing something just for the sake of it.'

The large white bird waddled around the pile of dung on the track and began picking at it, searching for insects to eat. Cambiz shook his head.

'It would make a tasty meal, lord.'

Klietas smiled to himself. 'I have plenty to eat. I assume you do, too.'

Cambiz nodded. Deputy-governor Almas, the one-handed former horse archer in Dura's army, had gifted the farmhand cum adviser, supervisor and general know-it-all to Klietas. Klietas had at first found the old man's presence irksome, but had slowly, grudgingly come to accept his experience and advice were welcome additions to the great gift he had received from the king. A large plot of land, a house, a pair of oxen, seeds, tools, an iron plough and access to substantial funds meant Klietas had the potential to become rich. Very rich. But he was young, inexperienced and needed to be steered in the right direction, which is where Cambiz came in.

Cambiz was a drifter, a man who had turned his hands to farming, goat herding, camel driving, travelling salesman and fishing. He had begun life as a farmer in Persis before travelling to Babylon, Seleucia, Hatra and finally Dura, seeking refuge in King Pacorus' kingdom after fleeing across the Euphrates with a price on his head. He first found service in the household of Spandarad, the one-eyed noble who became chief of Dura's lords, before purchasing his own camel train to take advantage of the lucrative transport opportunities that came when peace broke out between King Pacorus and King Haytham of the Agraci. He should have been rich but he had frittered away his money on women and gambling. Now an old man with grey hair and a wicked tongue, he was content to hire out his services to those in need of knowledge. He lived an austere life but the gods had blessed him with good health and a mind that resembled a bottomless well of knowledge.

Klietas stared with pride at his ploughed fields.

'I pray we have done enough.'

Cambiz wiped his nose on his sleeve.

'You have nothing to worry about, lord.'

It amused Klietas to be referred to as 'lord', especially as Cambiz was old enough to be his grandfather. But his mentor had insisted the title was apt, seeing as Klietas had saved the king's life, which had resulted in him becoming a farmer with considerable assets, not least the pair of oxen that he used not only to plough his own fields, but also hired them out to other farmers to

plough their fields. They had no money to pay him, but did provide manual labour to assist him to weed, water and maintain his own fields. In this way, he saved money by not having to hire hands until the harvest. Cambiz was right – there was nothing to worry about.

Each day Klietas rose before dawn and was in the fields as the sun began to climb in the eastern sky, not returning home until it was a huge red ball dipping in the west. He liked to keep busy to ensure his farm would be successful, thereby ensuring he would not disappoint the king. Cambiz told him such thoughts were nonsense, that King Pacorus had bigger things to worry about than one young farmer, and in any case the king was rich and could afford to throw money away if he wanted to. But Klietas was determined to succeed and repay the faith King Pacorus had placed in him.

‘You should think about a bigger house, lord,’ said Cambiz, ‘after the crops have been harvested, I mean. A man should live as befitting his status, and I have a feeling your status will be much improved after the harvest.’

‘Home’ was a simple single-story mud-brick house that had formerly been an outpost for Dura’s royal stud farms. As such, it had stables as well as animal pens. The former office had two rooms, a flat roof, two chairs, a table, two chests and a reed mat on the floor of the smaller room for a bed. It also had a well to provide water as the Euphrates was five miles away, and when it had been built the office did not have access to water supplied by an irrigation system.

The vulture suddenly spread its wings and took to the air.

‘You should get yourself a wife, lord,’ said Cambiz.

Klietas subconsciously clutched the necklace around his neck, from which hung the bear claw taken from the beast that had attacked King Pacorus and wounded him. Cambiz saw the gesture and grinned.

‘There are plenty of women who would want to share the bed of the man who saved the king’s life.’

‘I do not want plenty of women, just one.’

‘Who?’

Klietas released the necklace. ‘It does not matter. Besides, I am too busy to think about marriage.’

As if by magic, or perhaps it was the will of the gods, they heard the sound of hooves on the dirt track behind them, a slow plodding noise that prompted them to turn. Cambiz, who was always suspicious of soldiers on horseback, frowned. But Klietas smiled when he recognised an Amazon. The coat of her horse shone in the sunlight and its rays glinted off her burnished

helmet. He was beaming when she removed her helmet to reveal the figure of Haya sitting in the saddle. He bounded over to her. She smiled at him.

In contrast to her immaculate appearance, he was something of a mess. His shoes were dirty, his leggings were torn and his tunic was filthy. As he had no wife or family and lived alone, he had neglected his appearance. He had followed the king's example in being clean-shaven, though he did not shave every day so his chin was showing a dark shade of stubble. His thick mop of dark-brown hair was longer than shoulder length and was matted, and there was dirt under his fingernails.

She looked him up and down. 'Have you been sleeping under the stars?'

He laughed to reveal a row of perfect white teeth. At least he had not been neglecting them. She jumped down from her horse and embraced him, screwing up her nose at his body odour.

'You need a bath.'

He wrapped his arms around her. 'It is so good to see you. Are you well?'

What a ridiculous question. She was a vision of a goddess, her olive skin flawless, her brown eyes sparkling and her hair thick and lustrous, even if it was plaited down her back in the style favoured by the Amazons. Tall and lithe, his eyes were drawn to the shape of her breasts under her mail shirt. She kissed him on the lips.

'I am well.'

'You look absolutely beautiful,' he told her.

Cambiz, loitering a few paces behind, raised an eyebrow at his declaration. He knew the Amazons well enough, as did every citizen who lived in the Kingdom of Dura, and also knew to keep well away from them. He saw the recurve bow in its case hanging from the right side of Haya's saddle, the two full quivers on the left side, and the sword and dagger at her hip. Klietas turned.

'Cambiz, come and meet Haya.'

The old man ambled over and tipped his head at the slayer wrapped in an enticing body. Haya's brown eyes examined him with a cool disdain.

'This is Cambiz,' beamed Klietas, 'my right-hand man and friend who has guided me over the past few months.'

Haya looked at the shabby clothing and unkempt beard and hair of the old man. Cambiz winked at her and extended an arm.

'Come harvest time, Klietas will be a rich young man.'

Haya glanced at the fields either side of the track, extending into the distance. Minu had not lied; the king had purchased a great deal of land for Klietas.

‘Then hopefully he will be able to buy some new clothes and purchase a razor and comb.’

Cambiz took an instant dislike to her. Like everyone he had heard all the stories about the battlefield prowess of the Amazons, but others spoke in hushed tones of their arrogance and cruelty, which the establishment of The Sanctuary had done nothing to squash. Who was this girl to look down on him? Her beauty might have dazzled Klietas, or entranced him for she was probably also a witch, but he was too long in the tooth to be taken in by a pretty smile and a shapely arse.

‘Come,’ said Klietas, linking an arm in hers, ‘let me show you where I live.’

‘I will see you in the morning, lord,’ shouted Cambiz, eager to be away from the she-devil, raising an arm and turning to walk back to his hovel a quarter of a mile away.

‘I thought I would see you before now,’ remarked Klietas.

‘We have both been busy,’ she replied, resting her head on his shoulder. ‘You have been establishing your farm.’

‘And what have you been doing?’

‘This and that,’ she answered evasively.

She led her horse to the stable next to the mud-brick shack Klietas called home, the former squire assisting her unsaddle the mare, rub her down and feed her from the fodder she had brought with her. Then they retired to his house, which redefined the word ‘basic’. But she smiled, ignored the cockroaches scuttling around on the floor and smiled when Klietas poured water from the well into a pair of cracked wooden cups. He pulled up the chairs and they both sat at the table, he gazing into her eyes; she looking kindly at the young male who was madly in love with her.

‘Where are your oxen?’ she asked.

‘Working on another farm,’ he told her. ‘After they had ploughed my fields I rented them out to other farms.’

She looked around at the empty room.

‘Where do you keep the money from the rents?’

He shook his head. ‘The farmers have no money, but they send their sons to assist me with maintaining my fields as part-payment, and after the harvest they will give me a portion of their crops. Then I will sell that and my own crops to the army, according to the terms of the contract drafted on my behalf by Deputy-Governor Almas.’

She toasted him. ‘You have done well, Klietas.’

She noticed a crude statue on the window ledge, a clay effigy depicting a figure seated with a dog at its feet.

‘What is that?’

‘The Goddess Gula,’ he told her, ‘who creates life in the land and keeps watch over all my crops. I pray to her every night that she will look favourably on my efforts.’

She instinctively reached for the hilt of her sword when she heard the trundle of wheels outside. Klietas laid a reassuring hand on her arm.

‘It is just my evening meal.’

He jumped up and went to the wooden door that had seen better days, opening it to see a grinning imbecile outside holding a fish, a very large fish.

‘Freshly caught this afternoon, lord,’ grinned the toothless halfwit, who caught sight of Haya standing by the table.

Klietas took the carp. ‘Thank you, Aref.’

Aref winked at him. ‘Same time tomorrow, lord?’

‘Same time tomorrow.’

Klietas closed the door and placed the fish on the table. He took out his knife and began to gut it, suddenly stopping and looking at Haya.

‘Forgive me. I am so used to living on my own I did not think. Would you like to share it with me?’

She nodded. ‘I would love to.’

He first washed the grime from his body with water from the well. Normally he did so naked but he was careful to retain his leggings with a female guest in the house, afterwards preparing and cooking the fish. The time flew by as Haya reminisced about the previous year’s campaign in the north. She asked if he was happy.

‘Cambiz thinks I should get a wife,’ he informed her.

‘And what do you think?’

‘It would be nice to have someone to share my life with.’ He gestured at the empty platters. ‘Someone to talk with at the end of each day, like we are doing now.’

She changed the subject. ‘Who was the fisherman?’

‘Aref? He is not a fisherman; he’s a farmer whose land is near the river. He and his family scratch a living. I let him use my oxen for free, so he always gives me a portion of his family’s catch of fish.’

She left her chair to sit on his knee, placing an arm around his shoulders. She kissed him on the cheek.

'You will not become rich by giving things away.'

He felt his heart race and his loins stir. Her hand went under his tunic and she began stroking the scars on his chest.

'Have your wounds healed, my love?'

He nodded, unable to speak so mesmerised was he with her. She kissed him tenderly on the lips, her tongue gently forcing itself into his mouth. He surrendered totally to her wishes as she removed his tunic and let her hand drop to his groin.

The next few hours were the most blissful of his life. They made love on the reed mat in his sleeping quarters, her lithe limbs wrapping themselves around his toned frame as he penetrated her and caused her to pant and moan. They were both young and in their prime, but when the first rays of dawn lanced through the broken shutters of the room they were both spent. They lay in each other's arms for what seemed like an eternity, not speaking, just caressing each other with gentle strokes. Klietas' manhood lay limp and forlorn after a night of hard usage, even the sight of Haya's naked body unable to elicit a response. He had tasted pleasures he could not conceive of even in his wildest thoughts, and as the room slowly filled with light he began to dream of a life with Haya by his side. His body may have been drained but his mind raced with ideas about marriage, raising a family and seeing his sons work the land the king had given him. It all suddenly made sense and he closed his eyes to thank Gula for her blessing. When he opened them Haya was looking at him.

'The queen has need of you.'