

Chapter 1

Late October 382 AD

The Syrian Desert



Three dozen Romans padded across the searing wilderness, the air dry as salt and crawling like the breath of an oven across their skin. The first six of the party rode on the backs of camels, and the thirty behind were escort legionaries, trooping two-abreast, their ringmail armour glinting like white flames in the dazzling sun. Every so often the sound of popping corks and glugging water broke the shrill song of nearby insects and croaking desert toads.

The men saddled upon the two foremost camels were *dromedarii* scouts, draped in white robes, bronze scale jackets and iron helms. With the lands of Sassanid Persia just days ahead, these expert desert watchmen were supposed to be leading the way, alert and vigilant, but one of them was clearly drifting into a heat-induced slumber. He listed backwards in the saddle until the scales of his bronze vest – hot as coals – sizzled against the camel’s hump. The beast grunted and groaned, then shook its great body, throwing the scout. The man woke as he fell, screaming. He threw out a hand to break his fall and instead broke his wrist. With much grumbling and sighing of hot and exhausted men, the column slowed.

Ambassador Sporacius guided his camel carefully around the fallen man then looked back down the column. His chiselled face was streaked with sweat, his deep-set eyes like vaults of wisdom as he scanned the small party before settling on one of the marching men near the back: a low-ranking type, going by his scarred helmet, poor-quality ringmail, tattered boots and the way he marched with his head down – a soldier yet to win confidence.

‘You, Legionary,’ Sporacius called. ‘Help him.’ It was a command that was not his to give, for he was not a military man, but he delivered it assertively, the demand clear but respectful.

The legionary mutely jogged forward, helping the injured dromedarius to his feet. The camel-scout, ashen-faced with pain and embarrassment, cradled the wounded wrist under his opposite armpit and coyly glanced up at Sporacius. ‘I will lead my beast on foot from here on in.’

‘Probably for the best,’ Sporacius said, again, with a well-measured tone selected to reprimand but not humiliate. He mopped at his neck and short silver hair with a damp cloth then turned to the legionary who had helped. ‘It’s Urbicus, isn’t it?’

‘Yes sir,’ the legionary muttered in reply.

‘Good work,’ Sporacius said, flicking his head towards the column’s end. ‘Now back to your place.’

‘Yes sir,’ the legionary replied mutedly, his head still dipped.

With that, Sporacius circled his camel again and swished a hand. ‘Onwards.’



As the column crunched ahead once more, Urbicus the legionary held back, shoulders rounded, head dipped. After years of leading men, where eye-contact and a proud stance had been essential, this false name and pretend posture felt strange to Pavo. But it had to be this way. Exile and anonymity.

Only when the rear ranks of marchers – two abreast once again – came by, when every strange face was past him, did he tilt his head up just a little, the shade of his helmet peeling back and the sunlight spreading across his eagle-like face and hazel eyes.

He fell into place alongside the unpartnered legionary at the tail end of the party, who marched with that same head-down posture. This man’s emerald eyes were rolled up a little in their sockets, scrutinising the column, particularly the riders. ‘He was watching you,’ Sura said quietly, the words

disguised by the thump and grind of boots on dust and sand. ‘Studying your face when you were helping the fallen scout.’

Pavo followed his oldest friend’s gaze. Behind Sporacius, guiding his camel alongside the remaining dromedarius scout, rode a young officer in a white tunic spotted with two large purple decorative circles and arrow-stripes at each shoulder. He wore a black felt cap from the rim of which short brown curls sprouted, and he sported a thick, curly beard. This was General Stilicho, half-Roman, half-Vandal – and most importantly a military man of growing repute, sent on this sortie to aid and learn from Ambassador Sporacius. He was a few summers younger than Pavo and already he was Emperor Theodosius’ *Comes Stabuli* – master of the imperial stables – and husband to the emperor’s adopted niece.

‘Not him,’ Sura said. ‘*Him.*’

Pavo followed Sura’s slight tilt of the head to see the silver-cloaked man riding alongside Stilicho. *Trierarchus* Ripanus, captain of the vessel that had brought them here to what felt like the edge of the world. Ripanus was staring off to the right of the column, scanning the desert wastes, his pinkish face pinched against the sun’s glare and one arm – bare apart from the leather bracer on the wrist – raised to shield his deep-set eyes from the light. He wore an *intercisa* helm with a jutting and sharp fin-like ridge similar to Pavo’s and Sura’s, but made distinct by the opals inlaid in the two eye motifs above the brow. ‘He was watching me? Are you sure?’

‘As sure as cock-rot in the island brothels. Do you think he suspects?’

‘No,’ Pavo muttered. ‘We played our part well on his boat. As far as he’s concerned, I’m Urbicus and you’re Mucianus – nothing but a pair of low-ranking swords.’

‘He was smiling when he was watching you... but his eyes weren’t. And what about the thing the oarsman said when we were at sea?’

Pavo chewed his bottom lip and stared at the swaying supply pack of the legionary in front of him as he replayed the memory. One of the rowers on Ripanus’ vessel had been particularly friendly – bringing Pavo water during his bouts of sea-sickness. One night, as the others slept, the fellow had shared wine with him and Sura. Pavo, irked by Sura’s suspicions about Ripanus, had asked the rower what he knew of the captain. The rower had laughed wryly, and answered in a way Pavo had not

expected. *'There is a statue of Neptune in the Rhodos docks. One night, years ago, I made love to a beauty of a woman at the foot of the statue. It was one of those moments you know you'll remember forever. I recall thinking at the time that I'd never forget the statue's bright red robes and golden trident. Yet the next time I put into port there, the robes were blue and the trident silver. The locals swore to me that nobody had repainted it. It was the same statue, no doubt. But at the same time, it wasn't.'* He had swigged on his wine a few times before continuing. *'What do I think of Ripanus? He is a fine captain. Loves his ship and his men as if they are his brothers. I'd row into a storm if Ripanus asked me to.'* He had sucked on his wine again and exhaled contentedly through his nostrils, before holding up a finger and wagging it towards the figure of the trierarchus, sleeping near the helm. *'But that... is not Ripanus.'* Pavo felt that same shiver now as he had then. *'He's wearing Ripanus' cloak and helmet. Looks very similar... similar, but not the same. Maybe it's just age; before this voyage I hadn't seen him in years. I don't know...'*

Something yanked Pavo from the memory. Two small, simultaneous flashes of reflected sunlight, just ahead. He looked up, realising the flashes had come from Ripanus. Yet the captain was still staring out across the desert wastes on the right. But Pavo's gaze was drawn to the inlaid opals on the man's helm. Two polished gems, two flashes of light. Had the man just snatched a rearward look at him and Sura? The croaking of insects rose into a shrill, almost deafening sound, and the beat of footsteps seemed to quicken and quicken. He felt his sweat-soaked tunic and his ringmail tighten around his chest like a shroud.

'You're probably right,' Sura exhaled. 'I'm making too much of it. The heat is cooking my brain. Nobody here knows who we really are,' he tried to reassure.

Pavo sighed, the tension easing a fraction.

'We are two escort legionaries. The lowest-ranking men on this mission,' Sura continued as he peered ahead through the silvery heat in search of some sign that they were near their destination. 'Our job is to stand around in a Persian palace while that lot at the front flap their lips at the new King of Kings.'

Pavo took a few dried tarragon leaves from his purse, popped one onto his tongue and offered Sura the other. The texture and earthy flavour conjured a little saliva into his dry mouth, and the herb was

always a good source of energy on a march such as this. As he chewed, he mulled over their role. The Persian King of Kings, Ardashir, was dead. His successor, Shapur III, needed to be persuaded that the recent peace between his empire and that of Eastern Rome was worth preserving – formalising, even. The division of Armenia between the two states had been agreed in principle. Now it was time to thrash out the detail.

‘Right *now* things are not ideal,’ Sura continued, gesturing to the marching men and animals ahead. ‘The aroma of thirty-four sweaty crotches and six camel arses is,’ he paused to pluck the perfect word out of the air, ‘diabolical! But give it two more days and we’ll be in the cool and shady halls of Ctesiphon. I heard stories from escort soldiers who travelled there before. Apparently the Persian women like us ‘exotic’ westerners... and General Stilicho reckons these talks will last for some time.’

Pavo tried to smile, but it was a feeble attempt.

‘Come on, Pavo,’ Sura continued. ‘Thracia may be a thousand miles behind us, but our homeland is at peace, at long last. The war is over.’

Pavo slid his eyes round to meet Sura’s. ‘But the wrong man won.’

Sura’s lips moved a few times before he fell silent.

There was no argument to counter this, no platitude to lessen the truth of it. The Gothic War was over, but Gratian, Emperor of the West, had claimed it as *his* victory, securing and reaffirming his position as senior emperor over Theodosius and the still-weakened eastern realm. Gratian, the man complicit in the terrible military disasters that had crippled the Eastern Empire, was now effectively its master. Worse, his agents – the *Speculatores* – were still crawling all over their distant homeland. They came in many guises – artisans, entertainers, riders, soldiers, friends, beggars – but every one of them was a highly-trained killer. All *Speculatores* were marked somewhere with that wretched emblem of their secretive school – a single, staring eye.

Checking nobody was watching, Pavo reached into his purse and lifted out a leather strap, from which two lead tags hung, bearing his true name and that of his beloved legion back in Thracia. He traced a finger over the etching, *Legio XI Claudia Pia Fidelis*, and sighed: ‘Be watchful, Brothers.’

‘The Claudia lads will be well,’ Sura said.

‘Even with their new commander?’ said Pavo, tucking the *signaculum* tags away again.

‘I only *heard* about the man chosen to replace you. I don’t know for certain that-’

‘You said he was a Western officer.’ Pavo cut him off.

‘That much is true, but that doesn’t mean-’

‘If he’s from the West then he’s Gratian’s man. Gratian knows that the Claudia lads were behind us in everything we did to defy him,’ Pavo said, staring at the ground before them.

‘Doesn’t mean this new tribunos is a bad man. Gallus came from the Western Empire,’ Sura said quietly. ‘Sebastianus too, and Geridus.’

Pavo tilted his head to one side in agreement. ‘Aye, you are right, and they were golden. I just can’t help but taste danger for our comrades back there.’

Sura spat into the dust. ‘What can we do? We’re supposed to be dead men, Pavo. If we show our faces in the Eastern Empire anytime soon, Gratian’s *Speculatores* will peel them off, and if we go near the Claudia then they will suffer too. We can’t go back,’ Sura finished.

‘Exactly. We’re at the wrong end of the world, in hiding, in failure.’

‘So why torment yourself? Think of what lies ahead,’ Sura said, then batted the rear of one hand across his chest, his neck suddenly lengthening. ‘Look, we’re almost across the desert.’

Pavo peered ahead to see a shimmer on the horizon – some four miles away. A great river, which from this distance was merely a vague green ribbon, glittering where the sunlight caught the rippling current. ‘The Euphrates,’ he said almost in unison with every other man in the party. Beyond was ancient and fertile Mesopotamia, the heartland and bread basket of Sassanid Persia.

One of the legionaries in front of Pavo and Sura smacked his dry lips at the sight of the broad and flowing fresh water. ‘My drinking skin is warm and flat. Little more than spit left in there. When I get to the river, I’m going to drink myself sick,’ he said with a cackle.

‘Idiot,’ Sura whispered.

The legionary swung round, his bulbous nose scrunched up in anger. ‘You got something to say, *tiro?*’

Sura balked at the term. ‘A recruit?’

The legionary snorted. ‘Looks like it to me.’

Pavo noticed his friend's fair skin reddening with ire. 'One day we'll be veterans like you two,' he said before Sura could reply.

'Wasn't talking to you,' the bulbous-nosed one sneered, then jabbed a finger at Sura. 'This one was whispering about me.'

Mercifully, while Pavo had been talking, Sura had used the few heartbeats of respite to calm himself. 'Just wanted to offer you some advice, that's all. The trick with marching in hot lands is to drink water carefully. Small and controlled sips,' he reasoned with Bulbous-nose in a friendlier tone. 'Back where I come from, I was famed for my ability to march for days on end with just a single drinking skin. You know what they used to call me? The Camel. The Camel of Adrianople.'

Pavo nudged Sura discreetly, stopping him before he said too much. The legionaries for this escort had been scraped together – some from Thracia, some from the island ports they had stopped at during the voyage to Antioch, and some were already aboard Sporacius' vessel when Ripanus' ship had rendezvoused with it in the southern Aegean. None of them really knew more than a few of the others, or their backgrounds. *Best it stays that way*, Pavo thought.

'Anyway, we don't need to stay thirsty till we get to the river,' the bulbous-nosed one shrugged and pointed, 'look, a village... and a well!'

All heads in the column rose, dry voices croaking in interest. A short way ahead, and to the right of their route, lay a desert settlement. It was a small and random collection of white-walled houses, lying like dice that had been tossed absently across the dust. Villagers sat on the flat roofs, sheltered under the shade of awnings. One man, painting a clay pot, looked up lazily, then carried on about his business. Bright robes and skirts hung from washing lines stretched between the homes and the few palm trees sprouting here and there. A dog lay in the shade of one building, scratching madly behind its ear. The village centred around a low circular stone well with a windlass and leather bucket positioned over it.

Sporacius saw it too. The ambassador eyed the well and the village for a moment, before raising a hand. 'Halt here,' he said. 'Go, take water in the village. Bring full skins back for us riders too.'

At this, General Stilicho sat upright in his saddle as if hearing a distant rumble of thunder. He heeled his camel round to Sporacius and the two entered into a sudden duel of words, a contest of leadership.

‘The escort is under *my* command,’ Stilicho snapped.

‘And this is *my* mission,’ Sporacius spat back.

Regardless, the soldiers were already peeling over towards the village.

‘Us two should stay back and guard the embassy,’ Sura reasoned, watching Stilicho and Sporacius, now left with just Ripanus and a pair of camel scouts to protect them. Still, he couldn’t resist a fond look over at the village and the well, nor a lick at his dry lips.

Just then, Ripanus’ gaze fell upon them, his face pinching with interest at the two men refusing the chance to drink.

‘We can’t afford to stand out,’ Pavo murmured to Sura, elbowing him and shoving him towards the village. ‘Come on.’

The two jogged on to catch up with the other legionaries moving towards the well. Bulbous-nose, now childishy-excited at the prospect of water, turned to backstep so he could talk to Pavo and Sura, his face bent in a grin. ‘Mucianus, isn’t it? You said they call you The Camel?’ he asked. ‘Well back in Thessalonica, they call me the horse.’

Sura feigned deafness.

‘I said they call me *the horse*,’ Bulbous-nose roared so he would hear this time, grabbing his crotch. ‘Because I’ve got a massive co-’

Thrum...whack!

Wetness, blood.

Bulbous nose halted, statue-still, an arrow tip sticking out of his left eye socket like a pointing finger, the milky liquid of his eye and pinkish-grey chunks of brain gently pattering down on the desert floor between him and Sura. The legionary’s body swayed, then crumpled. Some of the others had slowed, looking around in confusion, some still ambled on towards the well, oblivious to the silent strike.

Stunned, Pavo's eyes swept like a hawk's, across the desert village, then snapped onto the one thing that had changed. The man who had been painting a pot was now winking behind a bow, ready to loose another arrow. More, he now saw the similar shapes on the other roofs, and the bandits hiding in the doorways of the houses, betrayed by the blink of their steel blades.

'Ambush!' he cried as best as his parched throat would allow. Sura's shoulder crashed against his, knocking both of them clear of the potter's next arrow. All at once, his world was a tumbling chaos of dust, whizzing arrows and the punches of steel meeting flesh. Footsteps pounded and a desert battle cry rose as the hidden assailants sprang from the doorways. Pavo righted himself. Where was Sura? Some way behind them he heard the camels grunting in panic, heard Stilicho blaring orders from distance. But there was no imperative here other than survival.

A dusky-skinned bandit bounded towards Pavo, his loose robes flailing, his yellow-tinged eyes mean and his black beard wildly overgrown. The man had all the advantages: surprise, speed, weapon drawn. Pavo frantically grabbed at his shield strap, pulling the scarred, pale-blue screen from his shoulder and swinging it in front of him just as the bandit's broadsword swished round. The blade sliced into the leather edging and bit into the wood. Pavo grabbed the shield edge with his free hand and pivoted on his heel, the movement yanking the wedged blade from the bandit's hand. Before completing a full turn, he dropped his free hand to his scabbard and clasped it around his *spatha* hilt, drawing the legionary sword in one move and chopping it round into the bandit's neck. The man stumbled away in a fit of grunting and slapping at the lethal wound, dark blood sheeting out between his fingers. At once, Pavo sensed the whirr behind him, swung once more and fell to one knee, bringing his shield up to catch two more arrows.

'There are scores of them!' Sura cried from nearby.

Pavo saw his friend, splashed red, working his sword free of another bandit's body. In every direction, clusters of these mean-eyed robbers closed in. Fourteen of the escort legionaries lay dead or twitching. His heart pounded in his throat as he realised that he, Sura and the other fourteen remaining were trapped. His eyes swung to the potter's house, closest of the white-walled homes. The archer-bandit up on its roof was dead thanks to a thrown legionary spear and he now hung like a wet drape over the roof's edge, staining the white walls red. 'Inside!' he cried to Sura and the surviving

legionaries. He unclipped a *plumbata* – one of three lead weighted darts secured on the inside of his shield – and hurled it in the general direction of the nearest bandits, causing them to slow and duck. It would buy them a breath of time.

Lunging up from one knee like a sprinter, he charged for the potter's house, the others converging there with him. Three more legionaries fell as they ran but, in a metallic thunder and a chorus of gasping, the men barrelled into the house – a well of cool shade. Colourful rugs lay on the floor and a scented oil burner glowed. Nobody else inside. An old cane ladder led up to an open square hatch of sunlight.

'Onto the roof,' Pavo bawled, waving each man up.

Pavo and Sura's heads flicked from the bandits outside, coming for the door, to the last of the legionaries speeding up the ladder.

'Go!' Pavo demanded of Sura.

'No, you go!' Sura barked back.

'Go... and that's an order,' Pavo snarled.

Sura sped on up to the roof, then, just as the bandits spilled inside, Pavo clambered up, feeling a broadsword hack through the cane rung his boot had just left. He scrambled onto the roof and kicked the half-broken ladder down into the house interior, then swept his eyes around the low white mud-brick lip of this roof, ears pricking up at the rising clamour of bandit shouts and curses rising from inside and those gathering around each of the house's sides. Scores of them? There were more like a hundred, he realised. Against thirteen legionaries. His mind spun like a falling sycamore key, searching through moments in the past, moments like this, in search of a way out. He shot looks in every direction: nothing but pan-flat golden dust and calm blue desert sky... apart from just south of the village where a low set of golden hills rose – but they were too distant to attempt any sort of fighting retreat there.

'There's no way out,' he said quietly. He looked northwards, seeing that Sporacius, Ripanus and the camel scouts had backed well away – rightly, for it would be madness should an ambassador be hurt or killed in a futile attempt to save the men who were supposed to be guarding him. Regardless, Stilicho had dismounted, anguished. The general's sword was drawn, his chest heaving as he took a few steps towards the scene. Yet he did not approach any further. A soldier right enough, Pavo realised, but not a fool.

His thoughts were scattered by the *clack* of a new cane ladder swinging up against the lip of the roof beside him. ‘I’ll empty your purse, Roman,’ said a voice in broken Greek. ‘I’ll sell your armour and your clothes.’ The bandit’s fiercely ugly head appeared over the roof’s edge, his broadsword glinting. ‘I’ll feed your heart to the desert dogs.’

Another ladder clacked into place next to this man, and then another three on the opposite roof edge.

‘Together!’ Pavo roared. The thirteen legionaries backed up against one another, the reverberation of their panicked breaths and pounding hearts binding them at the last like a sheaf of wheat about to be ripped apart by a hundred scythes.

A long, low groan of camels pierced the air over the village. It came not from the few beasts in the north with Ambassador Sporacius, this was a chorus of many, coming from those southern hills. Pavo saw a dark jumble of silhouettes appear at the crest of the low hills then spill down towards the village. More desert warriors – camel riders, coursing between the houses like the waters of a burst dam, coming to help finish the job the bandits had started. He could not see much of them thanks to the sun at their backs, but there were eighty or so. Many of them stretched in their saddles, lifting bent bows into the air.

Thrum... whoosh.

At the same time, the ugly bandit scrambled up onto the roof along with three fellow thugs.

‘*Mithras*, it has been good fighting alongside you,’ Sura said quietly as he and Pavo braced and watched the storm of arrows and bandits speeding towards them.

Whump, whack, whack!

A mist of blood floated through the hot, late-afternoon air, settling on Pavo, Sura and the others. All of them stared as the ugly bandit shuddered, mid-stride, before crumpling, dead, an arrow quivering between his shoulder blades. The others who had climbed up with him fell too, riddled with shafts. Screams rose from the desert floor around the house, as the camel riders swept around the building like a tornado, swishing and stabbing with spears and curved blades at the men who had ambushed the legionaries. In a blur of noise and stampeding feet, a few dozen of the bandits fled, and half of them

were struck down by arrows in the back. As quickly as the desert had exploded into life, the din of battle faded to just the sawing of exhausted breaths.

‘What just happened?’ said one legionary, still pressed tightly beside Pavo and Sura, his sword drawn and trembling.

Pavo lengthened his neck to see over the roof’s edge and stare down at the camel riders. They were now milling slowly, checking that the stricken bandits were all dead and despatching those who were not. He saw that the riders wore light robes like the bandits, but they were also armoured in dark-brown, hardened leather cuirasses, and many wore iron helmets, some plumed. A chill breath puffed from the vaults of memory as he realised who they were. ‘Maratocupreni,’ he whispered.

‘Maroto... Marama... what?’ the shaking legionary beside him stammered.

‘It is the Maratocupreni,’ Pavo said, his voice full now. ‘Sheathe your swords.’

When the legionaries did not obey, Pavo’s face bent into an evil scowl like an eagle spotting its prey. ‘Sheathe your *fucking* weapons, *now!*’

The men were quick to obey this time. None questioned this man they had up until now considered to be some hopeless recruit.

Pavo gestured to the north, waving to Sporacius and Stilicho to indicate that the danger had passed. They hesitated, but when he repeated the gesture they began to walk cautiously towards the village. Pavo approached one ladder at the roof’s edge and descended. He found himself stepping down onto a carpet of bloody bandit bodies, surrounded by a forest of camel legs. The beasts milled around him, lowing and grumbling, their stink horrific. The fawn-skinned riders glared down at him with hard eyes, underlined with thick stripes of kohl, their mouths cruel, faces framed by their long, charcoal locks. Most telling of all, their bows remained nocked, and their spears and swords were not sheathed. One rider – a man built like a god with a sculpted face, limbs corded with muscles, hair hanging in sweeping, long dark locks to his broad shoulders – ambled over... and raised his bow, the arrow trembling at full draw, trained on Pavo’s chest.

Pavo realised he had made a fatal mistake. These were not the same Maratocupreni he had once known. These men were robbers just like the bandits. They would slaughter the legionaries on the roof

and the ambassadorial party unwittingly coming back towards the village. He would die out here, as an anonymous, forgotten fool.

‘Darik, no!’ a voice called out.

Another camel rider broke through. Their leader, Pavo realised as the figure placed a hand on the big warrior’s bow, gently pushing it down. This one sported a helm with a long, trailing plume and a face veil. With a nimble swish of one leg, this lead rider dismounted, landing almost without a sound.

Between the brow of the helm and the top of the face veil, sky-blue, almond-shaped eyes assessed Pavo.

Pavo held this one’s gaze, then realisation tolled within him like a hammer striking a bell. ‘Izo... Izodora?’ he stammered.

The leader unclipped the face veil and lifted off the helmet. Her pursed lips were humourless for a moment, but then they quirked at one side. The barest hint of a greeting.

‘By the *Djinns* of the Desert, Pavo, you have aged,’ she replied.



After they had buried the slain legionaries, Izodora, leader of the Maratocupreni, offered the services of her band as an additional escort for the Roman party. She led them to the Euphrates, where the arid golden nothingness began to sprout with patches of greenery – first hardy camelthorn here and there, then swaying grasses. Cicadas rose in a trilling song all around them. More, the air here seemed to be spiced with the scent of crops and woodsmoke – aromas of life. They reached the Euphrates’ western banks and boarded a flat-hulled ferry. The crossing was short and pleasant, the downriver breeze welcome. As they stepped off of the timber ferry and onto the river’s eastern banks, Pavo gazed across this ‘Land Between the Rivers’, spellbound. In contrast to the barren desert they had just crossed, it was so fertile, carpeted in lush, shimmering green clover fields, criss-crossed with sparkling brooks and

irrigation canals, stretching all the way to the eastern horizon. Bees and insects hummed all around, and the air carried a sweet scent from the many date-palm orchards lining the south.

With a few clipped commands from Stilicho – clearly rushed so Ambassador Sporacius couldn't deliver the orders first – they set off through this fecund land. Pavo took up his position once more at the rear of the surviving legionaries, Sura alongside. Izodora barked orders to her camel troops, sending them out wide to screen the party on either flank. The impossibly chiselled Darik, who seemed to be her second-in-command, led the leftmost screen.

Pavo eyed the Maratocupreni leader furtively. Back at the village, she had been abrupt with Ambassador Sporacius and General Stilicho, explaining plainly that she and her people served the Persian *Shahanshah* as outlying watchmen to keep the desert routes clear of bandits, and that they should thank not her but the King of Kings for their rescue. She had said just enough to gain their trust, and had mentioned nothing of her past with Pavo. Indeed she had not yet let on to them that she knew him at all. He watched as she roved up and down along her own riders, talking to some, then came over to the Roman column to ride level with Ambassador Sporacius and his officers. He observed carefully, trying in futility to read her lips – but he guessed she was talking about the ambush. If she even once spoke his real name it would ruin everything.

Near dusk, he prized off his helm and raked his fingers through his sweat-damp, short dark locks, the pleasant coolness of the coming night soothing on his scalp and neck. He closed his eyes for a few moments as he walked, taking a handful of deep breaths. When he opened his eyes again, he found that Izodora had fallen back and was walking her camel alongside him. For a while she remained silent, staring directly ahead. But he knew she was watching him from the edges of her eyes – like a huntress.

'You should see this place in high summer,' she said at last. 'These clover fields are ablaze with purple flowers.'

He shot her a sideways look, flummoxed by the banality of the statement.

'Do not worry, *Urbicus*,' she said in a tone lightly-mocking his choice of name. 'I found out from the men ahead that that is what they call you. I have not told them who you really are,' she added, quietly, once a small gap had grown between them and the legionaries just ahead.

Pavo nodded stiffly.

‘It takes a brave man to cross that desert,’ she said.

Pavo tilted his head a little to one side in the way he had seen gnarled veterans do in an effortless show of heroic modesty. ‘Brave, hmm, perhaps,’ he started.

‘-and a fool to cross it twice,’ she finished.

He sighed in defeat. ‘And both times you have saved me.’

The two fell silent again, and Pavo wondered how much she remembered of their previous meeting. Six years ago, as a mere *optio*, he and a detachment from the XI Claudia had been sent on a covert mission across the belly of the desert, tasked with infiltrating Persian lands and finding a lost scroll that documented the old King of Kings’ agreement to a lasting truce between the Empires of Rome and Persia. Along the way, the Maratocupreni had saved the Claudia from a marauding desert tribe.

‘Did you find what you were looking for all those years ago?’ she asked.

‘The scroll was not what we thought, but we obtained peace nevertheless, a peace that the ambassador is here to reaffirm.’

She smiled sadly. ‘I wasn’t talking about the scroll.’

Pavo gulped, caught off-guard for the first time in many moons by that desolate beast, grief. ‘I found my father in the depths of the Persian salt mines. He... he...’ a stinging, invisible hand choked him and pricked sharp needles into his eyes as he remembered Father’s final moments.

‘You found him, and that is what matters,’ Izodora said softly.

Pavo carefully rubbed his eyes as if he were only wiping tiredness away, then cleared his throat and flicked his head towards the outlying screens of Maratocupreni camel riders. ‘You rove far from the crescent valley,’ he said, thinking of the sunken crevasse to which she had taken the Claudia men for shelter all those years ago – the valley walls lined with cave-homes and the floor blessed with a natural spring.

‘We had to leave it behind three summers ago,’ she said quietly. ‘The spring dried up and the place became no more than a parched grave.’

‘Where is your new home? Where are the others?’ he said, thinking of the many hundreds of families who had been living in that crescent shelter.

Now it was Izodora's turn to struggle with words. 'There is no new home but whichever patch of desert floor we find ourselves upon come nightfall. There are... no others. This is all that is left.'

Pavo's heart plunged. He dared not ask what had become of the non-fighting Maratocupreni – the elderly and the children – for he feared he knew the answer. The desert was a cruel mistress: if thirst or hunger did not steal the lives of wanderers, then bands of raiders like those today would be quick to do so.

In the last hours of light, they passed wandering bands of shepherds, ancient mounds, fire shrines and shady palm groves. When the day finally faded, each screen of Maratocupreni riders settled in a tight circle, resting their backs on their dozing camels, eating and chatting. Meanwhile, General Stilicho ordered the legionaries to prepare a camp of sorts between the two camel groups, near one of the many brooks. Given that there were just thirteen legionaries, three dromedarii scouts, three officers and six camels, it was a somewhat pathetic camp, but nonetheless it offered a degree of familiarity and a little protection. The desert moon rose fiery and huge, a glowing coal that hung just above the horizon, the sky flaring blood-red around it. They cooked and ate a filling and salty wheat porridge, washing it down with cool, fresh draughts of brook water. Pavo more than once glanced across to Darik's camel camp. The Herculean warrior stood, braying in his native tongue as he acted out some past heroic deed. The watching Maratocupreni were entranced by the tale. Izodora too. It was this last fact that needled at Pavo just a little.

'Have you heard this?' Sura said, backstepping across his line of sight, breaking his train of thought.

Pavo turned to see the object of Sura's bemusement: the escort party's lone *contubernium* tent. The goatskin was sagging in the middle, patched-up badly and emblazoned with more than a few dubious stains.

'One eight-man tent, and thirteen of us are supposed to share it?' Sura stared at the limited space inside the tent, then at Pavo and the eleven other sweating, filthy legionaries, before glaring at one who broke wind for the hundredth time since eating. Even with two men on watch, this would still be a horrific experience. 'This is a joke, aye?' Sura asked.

He had directed the question at the legionaries, but General Stilicho overheard, and paced over from the spacious dignitary tent nearby. ‘The other tents were ripped apart by the bandits,’ Stilicho shrugged. ‘I sympathise, I really do.’ He stroked his curly beard for a moment, then clicked his fingers. ‘In fact, here’s what I’ll do: I’ll squeeze in there with you lot.’

Sura’s face fell. ‘What? No... n-’

But Stilicho carried on enthusiastically: ‘It is an officer’s duty to share the hardships of his men, eh?’ he said, dropping to all fours and squirming inside. ‘Come on, it’ll be nice and snug,’ he called from within, patting a space of ground for Sura. Pavo could not help but smile. The man was sincere yet affable – with the wits of a statesman but the manner of a soldier, unbothered by the superficial things most high-ranking imperial men obsessed over. When Pavo had first encountered him, the general had been playing knucklebones with the escort men, crunching through hardtack and enjoying their ribald humour. Pavo wondered if it was for show, but in the days since he had been equally ascetic: happily lacing his food with olive oil from the third-press, preferring sour soldier wine over the finer stuff, and – seemingly – relishing the opportunity to sleep in a cramped tent with stinking legionaries.

‘I’ll take the first watch on this side of camp,’ Pavo volunteered quickly, turning away to stifle laughter at the whole scenario. He limited himself to a gentle chuckle as he strolled over to the small break in the square palisade enclosure and planted his spear haft in the dust.

He heard the men in the overcrowded tent shuffling, grunting and complaining. A few threats were issued, then apologies from those who realised that in the darkness their threats had been directed towards Stilicho. A furious volley of farts conjured a resigned chorus of groans, a final sheepish apology and then, at last, there was silence. The only noise to be heard was the sound of night crickets, the gurgling brook, and the gentle chatter of Sporacius and Ripanus, still awake by the officer’s tent, sitting around their fire and drinking hot brew.

Pavo stared out into the night, the day just gone seeming hazy and unreal – like an entire moon rolled into a handful of hours. His legs ached and his feet pulsed with hot-spots, and his eyelids felt as if they were made of lead. He felt the dreaded hands of sleep crawling up his body again and again, and resorted to the usual tricks to stay awake – hard-learned in his seven years in the army – such as biting

his lip or digging his nails into his palm. But after the long march through the infernal heat and the strain of the bandit ambush, sleep found a way through. His head nodded forwards.

He stared up, entranced. The sky was pure black one moment, then sheet lightning flickered, betraying roiling storm clouds, tinged purple and green. There was something else up there too... something huge.

Boom! the thunder roared and again the lightning flashed. This time he saw them: a pair of giant eagles, soaring across the heavens. Both beasts had wings like sails and talons the length of men. One shrieked and then the other replied, the noise tearing the sky in two.

He sensed a presence next to him, and turned to the withered old crone standing there. She might have been there all along; he could not tell. In many ways, she had been there by his side since he was a boy. Still now, in his twenty-sixth year, she looked just as ancient as that first time he had seen her: her hair like wisps of web, eyes milky and sightless, face puckered and sad.

'What do you see?' she asked him.

He gazed around him, seeing a dark and strange land. Not Rome, nor Persia. It was like night in every direction and even under his feet, nothing but pure, Cimmerian blackness. So he looked up again. The eagles were circling one another, he realised, each beast's great head turning to keep track of the other. One was white as virgin snow, the other black – blacker than the land and the sky. The malice between the two was unmistakable.

Pavo felt a childish urge to demand answers from her. What was this? But the need faded. She had never given him answers, but she had taught him how to find them for himself. In the vision, he thought, the answers were always in the vision. He gazed up at the skies until he felt a deep, cold twist in his stomach. Such hatred between the two eagles. The certainty that they would fight. The great birds were symbols of Rome, and they could mean only one thing.

'A great war looms for the empire,' he said sadly.

She said nothing in reply, and he knew he was right.

'Yet the war in Thracia is over. How can another threaten so soon afterwards?'

'Thracia is but a small patch of land.' She held out her hands as if cupping an apple, then spread her arms wide. 'This war will change the entire Roman world.'

He raised a mirthless smile. 'I will have no part in it, for now I am in exile, beyond Rome's borders. Here I will live out my days and die.'

'Is that so?' She stared into his eyes as if she could see again.

'I don't see how it can be any different.'

'If you want to see, Pavo,' she said, 'then you must open your eyes.'

His ears pricked up, hearing only the roiling of the storm above and the shrieking of the eagles. 'I don't understand, my eyes are open, I have seen all there is to see here.'

Her lips parted again, her age-long teeth in a cage as she hissed once more. 'Open your eyes!'

He jolted awake with a croak and a gasp. Asleep on watch? For a moment, he was riddled with shame and shock, before he realised – with a glance at the dripping water clock – that he had been asleep for but a blink, rocking a little forward on his spear. All was the same: the quiet Persian night, the gentle chatter of the officers behind him, the chirruping crickets...

'Trouble, watchman?' Ambassador Sporacius called from behind.

Pavo turned to look over the legionary tent towards him, where the ambassador and Ripanus were finishing the last of their root drinks. The ambassador's regal expression was tinged with concern.

'No, Ambassador,' he replied, 'I just... just choked on some blown dust.'

Ripanus, sitting beside Sporacius and sipping on his cup of brew, eyed Pavo. It was a look that seemed to reach inside his veneer as a lowly recruit, and it lasted an uncomfortably long time. At last, the captain picked up a water skin and tossed it across the small camp. Pavo caught it.

'Drink,' Ripanus said, 'clear your throat.'

Pavo muttered in gratitude and turned away. But throughout the remaining hours of his shift, he was sure he could feel Ripanus' gaze on his back.



The following day, they trooped eastwards along The Persian Royal Road – a wide and ancient highway that spliced the endless network of shimmering grain fields and gurgling qanats. The route led very gradually downhill, until, near noon, the eastern haze sharpened and took shape. At first, they saw another huge, pale river winding across the land, north to south. The Tigris, Pavo realised, sister-river of the Euphrates, broad and endless. Next, they saw a sprawling city hugging the river on the near side and far. Pavo had to sweep his eyes across it three times to be sure it was not a trick of the heat – the place was huge! There were wards of pale-stucco houses, towers and manors, games arenas, stable yards and majestic bathhouses. Squares and avenues stretched, bronze monuments rose into the sky and a great barracks dominated a huge quarter of the place. Grand Fire Temples winked at the approaching party like the orange eyes of strangers offering just a tantalising hint of some forbidden secret. All of this was in a style vaguely reminiscent of imperial architecture but with curves, twists of colour and flair that made it seem magically different, mystical. On the sun-splashed far banks stood the greatest structure: a huge white palace that soared like a mountain and shone with the lustre of snow, surrounded by giant arches. Every single street and space within the city teemed with moving throngs of people and animals. Streams of them poured to and from the many gates around the city's lengthy defences. Pavo had never believed there could be a place to rival Constantinople, but his eyes made war with his beliefs now.

‘Welcome to Ctesiphon,’ Izodora said. ‘They call it *The Cities*, because she has grown so large.’

‘Emperor Julian once fought here,’ Sura mused.

Pavo pointed to the ward on these near banks, wagging his finger as he recalled the scrolls he had read in his childhood. ‘That district there – that was once a city in its own right: Seleucia. One of Alexander's jewels... he must have thought he had built a great metropolis, yet look at it now: swallowed up like a crumb – a mere ward of Ctesiphon.’

‘Listen to officer clever-bollocks,’ said Clodus, a weathered legionary with a permanently ruddy face. It was meant in jest – for this one and the other escort soldiers now treated Pavo and Sura with

respect following their vital words of encouragement during the desert ambush. But to Pavo the joking use of the term ‘officer’ sounded like the crack of a torturer’s whip. He half-laughed, half-grunted, then dipped his head a little.

They followed the royal road down towards Ctesiphon’s western gates – a monumental arch supported on the backs of two winged bulls with human heads and Persian-style beards. Sentries lined the high gatehouse, their breastplates shimmering like gold, watching the in and outflow of people, wagons and animals. The Roman embassy merged into the incoming stream. It was like stepping into a river with an unexpectedly strong current. Sun-burnished strangers bustled and barged all around them, jabbering in a polyglot babble, shouting over the din of hooves and footsteps. There was a new mix of smells too: fragrances, spices and ‘interesting’ body odours. The people wore bright gowns and most of the men sported long, thick beards. The more affluent ones travelled in sedan chairs, bathed in shade, draped in silk and dripping with jewels.

As they passed into the shadows of the huge gateway, Pavo noticed one guard posted at ground level wearing a tall helm and a scale vest, scanning each and every face entering the city. His beard and tumbling mane of hair glistened with oil, and his bronze earrings juddered whenever he moved his head to watch any particular incomer more closely. Unnervingly, he continuously flexed his fingers on his spear haft, as if eager to use the weapon. Pavo sensed trouble before it happened. The guard spotted the paler-skinned Romans amongst the many others coming in and bawled something. Instantly, five more dressed and armed like him came spilling from a doorway in the gate-arch. They spread out across Ambassador Sporacius’ path while the lead sentry held his spear out like a barrier, then barked something in his native Parsi tongue. Pavo could not hear what the demand was, but he could guess. Equally, he did not hear Sporacius’ reply, but he could detect that it too was spoken in Parsi. Yet it was not enough to appease the guard. General Stilicho tried next, unfurling and showing the guard one of the many scrolls he carried in a leather bag. The guard glowered at the scroll then shrugged and snapped at them once more, refusing to let them pass.

‘He can’t read Greek,’ Pavo sighed.

‘And he’s an arsehole,’ Sura added.

Pavo watched with interest, noting how Ripanus said nothing, sitting back on his camel and watching the struggles of Sporacius and Stilicho.

The belligerent guard became more and more animated, and his five charges began to puff themselves up like angry cats. Seeing this, Izodora groaned, then heeled her camel forward and spoke to the lead sentry, vouching for the Romans and their scroll.

Bitterly, the guard acquiesced, hectoring his five now-deflated charges back to the side of the gate arch then – with a grumble – beckoning the embassy inside.

The guard led them inside the city, through the windless streets and sweating, jabbering crowds. In a market ward, an older man, resting by a blue-tiled fountain, plucked on the strings of a *setar*, and a fellow sitting on an adjacent roof, legs dangling over the edge, slapped his hands on a *tombak* drum, lending the great flow of the city some sense of rhythm. Traders threaded this with regular piercing monologues about their spices, silks and jewels.

They passed a temple district and came to a vaulted bridge spanning the Tigris, the waters dotted with trade ships and fishing skiffs, the banks packed with women washing garments and drawing water. Finally, they peeled away from the masses and onto a broad, largely deserted avenue, lined with palms and statues of ancient Persian gods – the approach to the great White Palace of the King of Kings, Pavo realised, eyeing the great structure that he had first seen from miles away. He saw silvery sentinels lining the palace roof and dotted all around its exterior walled gardens.

‘Mithras,’ Sura croaked, seeing two of these guards standing either side of the entrance to the gardens. ‘It’s *them* – the *pushtigban*.’

For a moment, Pavo’s mind was thrown back to the desperate desert clash he and the Claudia had fought against the Persians, six years ago. None were more ferocious than the *pushtigban*, the Shahanshah’s personal guard. From the belt of each hung a *shamshir* – a long curved sword with a hilt marked in a honeycomb pattern for expert grip. They held bronze-coated spears and wore polished iron helmets adorned with finely crafted bronze wings. But most of all it was their steel masks that roused fear in the pit of one’s stomach: expressionless iron plates, hiding all but the glint of baleful eyes. Pavo felt his stomach twist in anticipation, fully expecting another challenge from the two elite sentries. But the grumpy gate guard muttered something in Parsi, and they were allowed through.

Inside the gardens, the scent of the cascading flowerbeds, the playful whistle of waxwings and the babble of stucco fountains effortlessly settled each man's nerves. When they came to a decorative moat hugging the palace's southern walls, a canoe drifted serenely towards their march, pulled along by some weak current flowing from a culvert in the palace foundations. Pavo glanced at the canoe – really just a halved, hollowed out log – and the man lying in it. Basking in the garden paradise and bright sunshine, he guessed. Then the smell hit them.

Faeces, vomit, decay.

'Urgh,' Sura choked.

The drone of flies rose like a thousand rasping saws, and Pavo noticed the black cloud of insects hovering around the boat.

'Mithras!' the red-faced Clodus croaked, covering his nose and mouth.

As they filed past the canoe, Pavo saw the awful state of the man aboard. Yes, he was lying on his back, but that was because he had been bound that way, with ropes as thick as ships' rigging strapped across his ankles, knees, waist, chest and forehead. His face was blistered and weeping pus, his lips half chewed off, purulent and bleeding. His eyes were obscured by unctuous globules of yellow, blood-streaked pus. And his belly... his belly was *writhing*. It took Pavo a moment to comprehend what he was looking at: the skin was gone and a mound of maggots were twisting and wriggling in the cavity where his guts should have been. In the places where his skin was intact, translucent grubs moved underneath, working to break through. Worst of all, the wretch's chest still moved with desperate, shallow breaths. He was still alive.

'*The boats*, they call it,' Izodora said quietly as the canoe drifted past and the smell with it.

Pavo realised she had fallen in to walk alongside the escort troops. Stilicho too.

'They force-feed the bound man honey and milk every day, so that he soils himself as he drifts around hopelessly. Next, the insects come, attracted by the stink, lay their eggs in him and when the young hatch, they eat him alive...'

Stilicho issued a strangled gasp of disgust. 'Shapur wanted us to see this,' he said with a sly look up at the magnificent palace and its many galleries – its every shady window like a watching eye. Indeed, the grumpy gate guard leading them was barely disguising a triumphant smirk at their reactions.

‘I don’t like this, not at all,’ Sura whispered so only Pavo could hear.

‘Best get used to it. This is our lives now... maybe forever,’ Pavo replied.

As they trooped on towards the palace, a soft hand rested on his shoulder. He twisted to see Izodora. While she continued to walk with him, Darik and the others had slowed, as if afraid to approach the palace. ‘You’re not coming inside with us?’ he asked her.

‘I cannot. I must return to the desert, to watch those approaches as I promised the Shahanshah I would. But I will be back here, from time to time.’

‘So this is goodbye?’

She checked nobody in the Roman column was looking back, then leaned close to him as they walked. He felt her robes brush on his forearms, smelt her scent – some washing oil spiced with frankincense, felt the shock of her wet lips at his ear. ‘Someone in your party betrayed this mission. Someone who didn’t want this embassy to reach the Shahanshah.’

Pavo peeled his ear from her lips, staring at her. ‘How can you possibly know this?’

‘I could not sleep last night. And all this morning my mind has been combing over the events of yesterday. That ambush. There was something wrong with it. It was too... too perfect.’

‘It was, until you arrived.’

‘But she seemed lost in thought. ‘We were tracking those bandits for days. They did not know we were following them. They took a very deliberate path upriver to reach that village. I crept close enough to their camp one night to hear their leader berating them. He was telling them they were behind schedule – that they had to be there in time.’

‘At the village? In time for what?’

Her eyes darkened. ‘In time for your lot to wander past.’

Pavo’s eyes shifted left then right. ‘How would they even know we were coming? How would they know our route?’

But she fell away now, slowing while the legionaries moved on towards the palace. ‘I don’t know, Pavo,’ she whispered to him as the distance between them began to grow. ‘All I can say for sure is that you must be watchful in there. Do not let your guard down.’

With that, she turned away and made for Darik and her men. He kept his head twisted round to watch her go, her hips swaying as she walked, the contours of her body changing gracefully underneath her robes and armour, her long tail of hair swishing at the small of her back.

Sura batted him across the chest to return his attentions forward, just as the shadow of the Persian palace crawled across them. The pushtigban pair watching the grand doorway straightened with a *clank* of iron armour to greet them. He gazed up at the palace and then across the men of the small embassy, knowing not which held the greatest threat. The only thing he did know for sure was that he would right now give anything to be far away from here, with his legion ... back home in Thracia.