

Spartacus: The Gladiator

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preface

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Chapter I



South-western Thrace, autumn 74 BC

When the village came into sight at the top of a distant hill, a surging joy filled him. The road from Bithynia had been long. His feet were blistered, the muscles of his legs hurt and the weight of his mail shirt was making his back ache. The chill wind snapped around his ears, and he cursed himself for not buying a fur cap in the settlement he'd passed through two days prior. He had always made do with a felt liner and, when necessary, a bronze helmet, rather than a typical Thracian fox-skin *alopekis*. But in this bitter weather, maybe warm clothing was more important than war gear. Gods, but he was looking forward to sleeping under the comfort of a roof, out of reach of the elements. The journey from the Roman camp where he'd been released from service had taken more than six weeks, and winter was fast approaching. It should have been less than half that, but his horse had gone lame only two days after he'd left. Since then, riding had been out of the question. Carrying his shield and equipment was as much as he could ask it to do without worsening its limp.

'Any other mount, and I'd have sacrificed you to the gods long ago,' he said, tugging the lead rope that guided the white stallion ambling along behind him. 'But you've served me well enough these last years, eh?' He grinned as it nickered back at him. 'No, I've no apples left. But you'll get a feed soon enough. We're nearly home, thank the Rider.'

Home. The mere idea seemed unreal. What did that mean after so long? Seeing his father would be the best thing about it, although he'd be an old man by now. The traveller had been away for the guts of a decade, fighting for Rome. A power hated by all Thracians, yet one that many served nonetheless. He had done so for good reasons. *To learn their ways so that*

one day I can fight them again. Father's idea was a good one. It had been the hardest act of his life to take orders from some of the very soldiers he had fought against – men who had perhaps killed his brother and who had certainly conquered his land. But it had been worth it. He had learned a wealth of information from those whoresons. How to train men mercilessly, until they fought as one unit. How vital it was to obey orders, even in the red heat of battle. How trained soldiers could be made to stand their ground in the most extreme situations. Discipline, he thought. Discipline and organisation were two of the most vital keys.

It wasn't just the desire to learn their ways that had you leave your village, added his combative side. After its last defeat by the legions, your tribe had been thoroughly cowed. There was no chance of fighting anyone, least of all Rome. You are a warrior, who follows the rider god. You love war. Bloodshed. Killing. Joining the Romans gave you the opportunity to take part in never-ending campaigns. Despite everything that they've done to your people, you still took pleasure from waging war alongside them.

I've had a bellyful of it for now. It's time to settle down. Find a woman. Start a family. He smiled. Once he would have scorned such ideas. Now they were appealing. During his service with the legions, he'd seen things that would turn a man's hair grey. He'd become used to them – in the red heat of battle, he had acted in much the same way, but sacking undefended camps and villages, and seeing women raped and children killed, were not things that sat especially well with him.

'Planning how to take the fight to Rome will do me for a while. The time for war will present itself again,' he said to the stallion. 'In the meantime I need a good Thracian woman to make lots of babies with.'

It nibbled his elbow, ever hopeful for a treat.

'If you want some barley, get a move on,' he said in an affectionate growl. 'I'm not stopping to give you a nosebag this near to the village.'

Above him and to his left, something scraped off rock, and he cursed silently for letting his attention lapse. Just because he'd encountered no one on the rough track that day didn't mean that it was safe. Yet the gods had smiled on him for the whole journey from Bithynia. This was a time when most Thracians avoided the bitter weather in favour of oiling and storing their weapons in preparation for the following campaigning season. For a lone traveller, this was the best time to travel.

I've done well not to have run into any bandits thus far. These ones are damn close to my village. Let there not be too many of them. Pretending to stretch his shoulders and roll his neck, he stole a quick glance to either side. Three men, maybe four, were watching him from their hiding places on the rocky slopes that bordered the rough track. Unsurprisingly for Thrace, they seemed to be armed with javelins. He eyed the tinned bronze helmet that hung from the pack on the stallion's rump, and decided against making a grab for it. Few peltasts could hit a man in the head. As for his shield, well, he could reach that while their first javelins were still in the air. If he was hit, his mail shirt would probably protect him. Trying to untie his thrusting spear would take too much time. He'd carry the fight to them with his *sica*, the curved Thracian blade that hung from his gilded belt. They were acceptable odds, he decided. As long as the brigands weren't expert shots. *Great Rider, watch over me with a ready sword.*

'I know you're there,' he called out. 'You might as well show yourselves.'

There was a burst of harsh laughter. About thirty paces away, one of the bandits stood up. Merciless eyes regarded the traveller from a narrow face pitted with scars. His embroidered woollen cloak swung open, revealing a threadbare, thigh-length tunic. A greasy fox-skin cap perched atop his head. He had scrawny legs, and his tall calfskin boots had seen better days. In his left hand, he carried a typical *pelte*, or crescent-shaped shield, and behind it a spare javelin; in his right, another light spear was cocked and ready to throw.

No armour, and apart from his javelins, only a dagger in his belt, noted the traveller. Good. His friends will be no better armed.

'That's a fine stallion you have there,' said the thug. 'A pity that it's lame.'

'It is. If it wasn't, you shitbags wouldn't have seen me for dust.'

'But it is, so you're on foot, and alone,' sneered a second voice.

The traveller looked up. The speaker was older than the first man, with a lined visage and greying hair. His hemp-woven clothing was equally ragged, but there was a fierce hunger in his brooding gaze. For all his poverty, his round shield was well made, and the javelin in his right fist looked to have seen good use. This was the most dangerous one. The leader. 'You want the stallion, I suppose,' the traveller said.

'Ha!' A third man stood up. He was larger than either of his companions;

his arms and legs were heavily muscled, and instead of javelins, he carried a large pelte and a vicious-looking club. 'We want it all. Your horse, your equipment and weapons. Your money, if you have any.'

'We'll even take your food!' The fourth bandit was skeletally thin, with sunken cheeks and a sallow, unhealthy complexion. He had no shield, but three light spears.

'And if I give you all that, you'll let me go on my way?' His breath plumed in the chill air.

'Of course,' promised the first man. His flat, dead eyes, and his comrades' sniggers, gave the lie to his words.

The traveller didn't bother answering. He spun around, muttering 'Stay!' to the stallion. Even as he slid his hand under his large circular shield and snapped the thong that held it in place, he heard a javelin zipping over his head. Another followed behind on a lower arc. It struck the dust between the horse's hooves, making it skitter to and fro. 'Calmly,' he ordered. 'You've been through this plenty of times before.' Reassured by his voice, it settled.

'Oeagrus, stop, you fool!' shouted the leader. 'If you injure that beast, I'll gut you myself.'

Good. No more javelins. The stallion is too valuable. Keeping his back to his mount and raising the shield, he turned. The skinny bandit was to his rear now, but he wouldn't risk any more spears. Nor would the others. Drawing his sica, he smiled grimly. 'You'll have to come down and fight me.'

'Fair enough,' growled the first man. Using his heels as brakes, he skidded down the slope. His two comrades followed. Behind him, the traveller heard the thin brigand also descending. The stallion bared its teeth and screamed an angry challenge. *Let him even try to come close.*

When the trio reached the bottom, they conferred for a moment.

'Ready?' he asked mockingly.

'You whoreson,' snarled the leader. 'Will you be so arrogant when I cut your balls off and stuff them down your neck?'

'At least you'd be able to find mine. I doubt that any of you scumbags have any.'

The big man's face twisted with fury. Screaming at the top of his voice, he charged, pelte and club at the ready.

The traveller took a couple of steps forward. Placing his left leg behind

the shield, he braced himself. He tightened his grip on his sica. *This has to be quick or the others will be on me as well.*

Fortunately, the thug was as unskilled as he was confident. Driving his shield into his opponent's, he swung a wicked blow at his head. The traveller, rocking back slightly from the impact of the strike, ducked his head out of the way. Reaching around with his sica, he sliced the big man's left hamstring in two. A piercing scream rent the air, and the bandit collapsed in a heap. He had enough sense to raise his pelte, but the traveller smashed it out of the way with his shield and skewered him through the neck. The thug died choking on his own blood.

He tugged the blade free and kicked the corpse on to its back. 'Who's next?'

The leader hissed an order at the skinny man before he and the cap-wearing bandit split up. Like crabs, they scuttled out to either side of their victim.

The stallion trumpeted another challenge, and the traveller sensed it rear up on its hind legs. He stepped forward, out of its way. An instant later, there was a strangled cry, the dull *thump, thump* of hooves striking bone, and then the noise of a body hitting the ground. 'My horse might be lame, but he still has quite a temper,' he said mildly. 'Your friend's brains are probably decorating the road. Am I right?'

The two remaining brigands exchanged a shocked look. 'Don't even think of running away!' warned the leader. 'Oeagrus was my sister's son. I want vengeance for his death.'

Unobtrusively, the traveller lowered his shield a fraction, exposing his neck. *Let that tempt one of them.*

The man in the fox-skin cap clenched his jaw. 'Fuck whether the beast gets hit,' he said, hurling his javelin.

The traveller didn't move from the spear's path. He simply raised his shield, letting it smack directly into the layered wood and leather. Its sharp iron head punched two fingers' depth out through the inner surface, but did not injure him. Swinging back his left arm, he threw the now useless item at the thug, who scrambled away to avoid being hit. What he wasn't expecting was for the traveller to be only a few steps behind his flying shield. When the bandit thrust his second javelin at his opponent, it was parried savagely out of the way.

Using his momentum to keep moving forward, the traveller punched his opponent in the face with his left fist. The man's head cracked back with the force of the blow, and he barely saw the sica as it came swinging back around to hack deep into the flesh where his neck met his torso. Spraying blood everywhere, and looking faintly surprised, he fell sideways into the road. Keeping time with the slowing beats of his heart, a crimson tide flooded the ground around him. *Three down, but the last is the most deadly.*

The traveller turned swiftly, expecting the leader's attempt to stab him in the back. The move saved him from serious injury, and the javelin skidded off the rings of his mail shirt and into thin air, causing the man to overreach and stumble. A massive backhand to the face sent him sprawling backwards on to his arse, losing his weapon in the process.

He stared up at the traveller, frank terror in his eyes. 'I have a wife. A f-family to f-feed,' he stammered.

'You should have thought of that before you ambushed me,' came the growled reply.

The bandit screamed as the sica slid into his belly, slicing his guts to ribbons. Sobbing with pain, he waited for the death blow. But it did not fall. He lay there, helpless, already passing in and out of consciousness.

A few moments later, he opened his eyes. His killer was watching him impassively. 'Don't leave me to die,' he begged. 'Even Kotys wouldn't do this to a man.'

'Kotys?' There was no response, so he kicked his victim. 'You were going to cut my balls off and feed them to me, remember?'

He swallowed down his agony. 'P-please.'

'Very well.' The sica rose high in the air.

'Who in all the gods' name are you?' he managed to whisper.

'Just a weary traveller with a lame horse.'

The blade scythed down, and the brigand's eyes went wide for the last time.

Ariadne scraped back her hair and carefully pushed a couple of bone pins into her long black tresses, fastening them into place. Sitting on a three-legged stool by a low wooden table, she angled the bronze mirror that sat there so that it caught the watery light entering through the hut's open doorway. The shaped piece of red-gold metal was her sole luxury, and using

it occasionally served to remind her of who she was. This was one of those days. To the vast majority of the people in the settlement, she was not a woman, a relation or a friend. She was a priestess of Dionysus, and revered as such. Most of the time, Ariadne was content with this prestige. After her harsh upbringing, her elevated position was better than she'd have ever dreamed possible. But it didn't mean that she didn't have needs or desires. *What's wrong with wanting a man? A husband?* Her lips pursed. Currently, the only person showing interest in her was Kotys, the king of the Maedi tribe. Unsurprisingly, his interest had put paid to any other potential suitors. Those who crossed Kotys tended to end up dead – or so the rumour went. Not that there had been any before that, she reflected bitterly. Men with the courage to court a priestess were rare beasts indeed.

Ariadne did not want or appreciate Kotys' lecherous advances, but felt powerless to stop them. He hadn't yet tried to become physical, but she was sure that was because of her vaunted status – and the venomous snake that she kept in a basket by her bedding. Her situation was complicated by the fact that she had to remain in the village. She had been sent here by the high priests in Kabyle, Thrace's only city, which lay far to the north-east. Extraordinary circumstances notwithstanding, hers was an appointment for life. If she returned to Kabyle, Ariadne could expect to be performing menial duties in the main temple there for the rest of her days.

There was no question either of returning to her family. While she loved her mother, and prayed for her every day, Ariadne harboured two feelings for her father. Hate was the first, and loathing was the second. Her emotions stemmed from her brutal childhood. Ariadne's existence had consisted of beatings, humiliation and worse, all at the hands of her father. A warrior of the Odrysi tribe, he had despised her because she – his only child – was not male. During the long years of misery, her sole means of escape had been praying to Dionysus, the god of intoxication and ritual ecstasy. It was only when communing with him that she'd felt some inner peace, a state of affairs that still prevailed. To this day, Ariadne believed that Dionysus had helped her to survive the unending abuse.

Other than through marriage, the concept of escaping her father had never entered Ariadne's mind. There had been simply nowhere for her to go. Then, on her thirteenth birthday, things had changed utterly. In a remarkable intervention, Ariadne's downtrodden mother had persuaded

her father to allow her attend the Dionysian temple in Kabyle as a prospective candidate for the priesthood. Once there, her burning determination had impressed the priests and allowed her to remain. More than a decade later, she still had no desire to return home. Unless, of course, it were to kill her father, which would be a pointless exercise. While Ariadne's position as a priestess elevated her above that of ordinary women, a patricide could expect but one fate.

No, her best option was to weather out Kotys' attentions – *Dionysus, let some doe-eyed beauty catch his eye soon* – and establish herself here. It had been a mere six months since she'd arrived at this, the main Maedi settlement. Not long at all. Ariadne's chin lifted. There was another option of course. If Kotys were deposed, a better man could take his place. She'd been here long enough to sense the seething discontent with his rule. Rhesus, the previous king, and Andriscus, his son, weren't especially missed, but Sitalkes, the noble who might have replaced them, had been a popular figure. They were careful not to do it within earshot of Kotys' bodyguards, but plenty of warriors spoke nostalgically of Sitalkes and his two sons, of whom one had been killed in battle against the Romans and the other had gone to serve the conquerors as a mercenary, and never returned.

If only someone would step forward and harness the simmering rage against Kotys, thought Ariadne. A short, sharp fight and the bastard would be gone for ever. Not for the first time, she cursed the fact that she'd been born a woman. *No one would follow me*. She studied the familiar reflection in the bronze mirror before her. A heart-shaped face, with a straight nose and high cheekbones, framed by long black ringlets of hair. A determined chin. Creamy white skin, most unsuited to the blazing sun that bathed Thrace every summer. A swirling design of dots tattooed on both her forearms. Slim but muscular shoulders. Small breasts. What does Kotys see in me? she wondered. I'm no beauty. Striking perhaps, but not pretty. As ever, the same answer entered Ariadne's head. He sees my wild spirit and, being a king, wants it for his own. It was the same fieriness that had often got her in trouble during her training, and which had also helped her to become a priestess sooner than might have been expected. Ariadne valued her tempestuous nature greatly. Because of it, she could enter the maenad trances easily, and reach the zone where one might encounter Dionysus, and know his wishes. My spirit belongs to no man, Ariadne thought fiercely. Only to the god.

Standing, she moved to her simple bed, a blanket covering a thick layer of straw in one corner of the hut. It was the same as that used by everyone in the settlement. Thracians were known for their austerity, and she was no different. Ariadne donned her dark red woollen cloak. In addition to marking her position in life, it served as her cover at night. Picking up the wicker basket that lay at the bed's foot, she put it to her ear. Not a sound. She wasn't surprised. The snake within did not like the chilly autumn weather, and it was as much as she could do to rouse it occasionally from its torpor and wrap it around her neck before performing a rite at the temple. Thankfully, this simple tactic was enough to inspire awe in the villagers' minds. To Ariadne, however, the serpent was but a tool in maintaining her air of mystery. She respected the creature, indeed feared it a little, but she'd been exhaustively trained to handle it and its kind in Kabyle.

With the basket under one arm, she headed outside. Like most of the others in the settlement, her one-roomed, rectangular hut had been constructed using a lattice of woven branches, over which a thick layer of mud had been laid. Its saddle roof was covered with a mixture of straw and mud, with a gap at one end to let out smoke from the fire. To the hut's rear stood part of the rampart that ran around Kotys' living quarters. It was a defence within the circular settlement's outer wall, reinforcing the king's elevated position and serving against treachery from within. Other huts lay to either side, each surrounded by a palisade that kept in their owners' livestock. The dwellings followed the winding paths that divided the sprawling village. Like the regular dungheaps and mounds of refuse, they had evolved over centuries of inhabitation. Ariadne was eternally grateful that her hut was a reasonable distance from any of these necessary, but stinking, piles.

She followed the lane towards the centre of the settlement, acknowledging the respectful greetings of those she met with a grave smile, or a nod. Women with babes at the breast and the old asked for her blessing or advice, while all but the boldest of the warriors tended to avoid her gaze. Children tended to fall into two camps: those who were terrified of her and those who asked to see her snake. There were far more of the former than the latter. There was little to leaven the loneliness of Ariadne's existence. She forced her melancholy away. The god would send her a man, if he saw fit. And if he didn't, she would continue to serve him faithfully, as she had promised during her initiation.

The crowd in front of her parted, revealing a group of richly dressed warriors. Ariadne's heart sank. It wasn't just the men's swagger that told her who they were. Their red long-sleeved tunics with vertical white stripes, elaborate bronze helmets and silver-inlaid greaves shouted stature and importance. So too did their well-made javelins, *kopis* swords and long, curved daggers. Ariadne mouthed a silent curse. Wherever this many of his bodyguards were, Kotys wouldn't be far behind. Glancing to her left, she greeted an elderly woman whose sick husband she'd recently treated. A torrent of praise to Dionysus filled Ariadne's ears. Smiling, she moved nearer to the woman's hut, turning her back on the path. With a little luck, the warriors wouldn't have seen her. Perhaps they weren't even looking for her?

'Priestess!'

Ariadne cursed silently. She continued listening to the old woman's patter, but when the voice called again, it was right behind her.

'Priestess.'

The traveller didn't linger at the scene where he'd been ambushed. Of course, the brigands had nothing worth taking. All he'd had to do was clean his sica, snap off the javelin that had skewered his shield and retie the shield to the pack on his horse's back. Leaving the bodies where they'd fallen, he set out for the village. At this rate, they'd be lucky to reach it before dark. That eventuality did not bear thinking about. Banks of dull yellow clouds overhead promised an early fall of snow. His luck was in, however. Whether it was the adrenalin pumping through his mount's veins, or an intervention by the Great Rider, he did not know, but the stallion now seemed to move more easily on its bad leg. They made good progress, coming within sight of the settlement just as the first flakes began to fall.

Loud bleating carried through the air, and the traveller looked up. Aided by a pair of dogs, a small boy was herding a flock of sheep and goats on to the road just ahead. 'We're not the only ones seeking shelter,' he said to his mount. They halted, giving the lad space to usher his resentful charges on to the stony track. 'Some bitter weather coming. You're wise to head for home now,' he said in a friendly tone.

The boy made no move to come down off the slope. 'Who are you?' he demanded suspiciously.

‘Peiros is my name,’ he lied. Even this close to his home, he did not yet feel like revealing his true identity.

‘Never heard of you,’ came the dismissive reply.

‘You were probably still crawling around on a bearskin rug at your mother’s feet when I left the village.’

Some of the wariness left the boy’s eyes. ‘Maybe.’ He began urging the last of the sheep and goats on to the road with sharp cries and waves of his arms. The dogs darted to and fro, ensuring that there were no stragglers. The traveller watched, and when the entire flock was safely down, he began to walk alongside the young shepherd. *I wonder what I can find out.* ‘How’s Rhesus?’ he asked.

‘Rhesus? The old king?’

‘Yes.’

‘He’s been gone these four years. A plague took him.’

‘His son Andriscus should be king then.’

The boy threw him a scornful look. ‘You really have been away. Andriscus is dead too.’ He glanced around warily before whispering, ‘Murdered, like Sitalkes.’ He saw the flash of horror in the traveller’s eyes. ‘I know, it was terrible. My father says that the Great Rider will punish Kotys eventually, but for now, we have to live with him.’

‘Kotys killed Sitalkes?’

‘Yes,’ replied the lad, spitting.

‘And now he’s the king?’

A nod.

‘I see.’

A silence fell, which the boy did not dare break. He wouldn’t admit it, but the grim traveller scared him. A moment later, the man halted. ‘You go on.’ He gestured at his stallion. ‘I mustn’t make him walk too long on his bad leg. I’ll see you in the village.’

With a relieved nod, the boy began chivvying the flock along the road again. The traveller waited until he was some distance away before closing his eyes. ‘Guilt nipped at his conscience. *If only I had been here, things might have been different.* He didn’t let the feeling linger. *Or they might not. I too might have been slain. Father’s decision to send me away was a good one.* Somehow he knew that Sitalkes also would not have changed what had transpired. It was impossible to deny his sadness at the news of his father’s murder, however. He thought of Sitalkes as he’d last seen him: strong, straight-backed, healthy.

Rest well. All he'd wanted was to come home. For his service with his most hated enemies to end. To hear that his father was dead was bad enough, but if it was true that he had been murdered, there would be no warm homecoming. No rest. Yet to think of turning away from the settlement and retracing his steps was not an option. Vengeance had to be obtained. His honour demanded it. Besides, where would he go? Back into service with the legions? *Absolutely not.* It was time to return, no matter what reception awaited him. *I do not question your will, Great Rider. Instead I ask you to protect me, as you have always done, and to help me punish my father's killer.* The fact that this meant slaying a king did not weaken his resolve.

'Come on,' he said to the stallion. 'Let's find you a stable and some food.'

Ariadne turned slowly. 'Polles. What a surprise.' She made no attempt to keep the ice from her voice. Polles might be Kotys' champion, but he was also an arrogant bully who abused his position of authority.

'The king wishes to talk with you,' drawled Polles.

Despite the veneer of courtesy, this was an order. *How dare he?* Ariadne forced her face to remain calm. 'But we spoke only yesterday.'

Polles' thin lips twisted in a travesty of a smile. Everything about him from his striking good looks to his long black hair and oiled muscles smacked of self-importance. 'Nonetheless, he desires . . . the pleasure of your company once more.'

Ariadne did not miss the short but deliberate delay in his delivery. Judging by the other warriors' chuckles, neither had they. Filthy bastard, she thought. Just like your master. 'When?'

'Why, now,' he replied in a surprised tone.

'Where is the king?'

Polles waved languidly over his shoulder. 'In the central meeting area.' *Where all the people can see him.* 'I'll be there in a moment.'

'Kotys sent us to accompany you to his side. At once,' said Polles, frowning.

'He may well have done, but I am busy.' Ariadne indicated the fawning old woman. 'Can't you see?'

Polles' face flushed with annoyance. 'I—'

'Are the king's wishes more important than the work of the god Dionysus?' asked Ariadne, lifting the basket's lid.

‘No, of course not,’ Polles answered, retreating.

‘Good.’ Ariadne turned her back on him.

Angry muttering broke out behind her. ‘I don’t know what you should say to the king. Tell him that we can’t find her. Tell him that she’s in a trance. Make up something!’ snapped Polles. Ariadne heard feet scurrying off and allowed herself a small smile. Soon, however, her conversation with the old woman petered out. It wasn’t surprising. Having the king’s champion a few steps away, no doubt staring daggers at both of them, would intimidate anyone. Murmuring a blessing on the crone, Ariadne glanced at Polles. ‘I’m ready.’

With poor grace, he beckoned her into the midst of his warriors. They closed ranks smartly and Polles led the way forward, bawling at anyone foolish enough to get in his way. It didn’t take long to reach the large open area which formed the settlement’s centre. The space was roughly circular in shape, and fringed by dozens of huts. Crowds of women gossiped as they carried their washing back from the river. A ragtag assortment of children played or fought with each other in the dirt while skinny mongrels leaped excitedly around them, filling the air with shrill barks. Smoke trickled from the roof of a smithy off to one side; the clang of a hammer on an anvil could be heard from within. Several men waited outside, damaged weapons in hand. There were wooden stalls selling metalwork, hides and essential supplies such as grain, pottery and salt, a miserable inn, and three temples – one each to Dionysus, the rider god, and the mother goddess. That was it.

Like their fellow Thracians, the Maedi were not a race that depended on trade for a living. Their territory was poor in natural resources. Farming provided little more than a subsistence living, so they had evolved into fighters, whose sole purpose of existence was to make war, either in their own land or abroad. The people visible proved this point: they were mostly powerfully built warriors. The majority were red- or brown-haired, with dark complexions. Varying in age from stripling to greybeard, all had the same confident manner. Clad in pleated, short-sleeved tunics that ranged in colour from red and green to brown or cream, they wore sandals, or leather shoes with upturned toes. Many wore the ubiquitous *alopekis*, the pointed fox-skin cap with long flaps to cover the ears. Richer individuals sported bronze or gold torcs around their necks. A sword or a dagger – often both – hung from every man’s belt or baldric. They stood around in groups, bragging of their exploits and planning hunting trips.

Polles and his men attracted the attention of everyone in the vicinity. Ariadne felt the weight of the onlookers' stares as they strode towards Dionysus' temple, a larger building than most, with a squat stone pillar on each side of the entrance. She heard their muttering too, and hated it. They were brave enough to fight in battle, but not to stand up to the king they resented. It made her feel very alone.

The king was waiting by the temple doors. He was flanked by bodyguards, while a throng of warriors stood before him. He cut a grand sight. Although he was nearly fifty, Kotys looked a decade younger. His wavy black hair showed not a trace of grey and there were few wrinkles on his shrewd, fox-like face. Over his purple knee-length tunic, Kotys wore a composite iron corselet with gold fittings and twin pectorals of the same precious metal. Layered linen pteryges protected his groin, and greaves inlaid with silver covered his lower legs. He was armed with an ivory-handled *machaira* sword, which hung in an amber-studded scabbard from his gold-plated belt. An ornate Attic helmet sat upon his head, marking his kingship.

As Polles and his men pushed through the throng, Kotys' eyes drank Ariadne in. 'Priestess! Finally, you grace us with your presence,' he called.

'I came as soon as I could, Your Majesty.' Ariadne did not explain further.

'Excellent.' Kotys made a peremptory gesture and her escorts moved aside. Reluctantly, she took a step forward, then a few more. Ariadne could sense Polles smirking. Turning her head, she glared at him. The gesture was not lost on Kotys, who waved his hands again. At this, the bodyguards withdrew some twenty paces to the smithy.

'You must forgive Polles' lack of manners,' said the king. 'He is ill suited to running errands.'

Why send him then? 'I understand,' she murmured, forcibly dampening her anger.

'Good.' One word was the limit of Kotys' own courtesy. 'It would be easy to make more suitable arrangements,' he said brusquely.

'And they would be?' Ariadne arched her eyebrows.

'Dine with me in my quarters some evening. There would be no need for Polles, no need for an escort.'

'I'm afraid that won't be possible,' Ariadne replied icily.

'Are you forgetting who I am?' asked Kotys with a scowl.

'Of course not, Majesty.' Ariadne lowered her eyes in a pretence of

demureness. 'Evenings are the best time for communing with the god, however,' she lied.

'That couldn't happen every night,' he growled.

'No, the dreams are only occasional. Dionysus' ways are mysterious, as you would expect.'

He nodded sagely. 'The rider god is the same.'

'Naturally, the erratic nature of their arrival means that I must always be ready to receive them. Spending an evening away from the temple is out of the question. Now, if you would excuse me, I must pray to the god.' Although her heart was thumping in her chest, Ariadne bowed and gave Kotys a beatific smile, before making to move past him.

To Ariadne's shock, he seized her by the arm. She dropped the basket, but unfortunately the lid stayed on.

'You're hurting me!'

'You think that's painful?' Kotys laughed and thrust his face into hers. 'Know this, *bitch*. Toy with me at your peril. I won't tolerate it forever. Remember that I am also a priest. You *will* come to my bed, one way or another. And soon.' He suddenly released his grip, and Ariadne staggered away, white-faced.

What she would have given for a lightning bolt to flash down from the sky and strike him dead. Naturally, nothing of the sort happened. She might be the representative of a deity, but so was Kotys. In a situation such as this, Ariadne was powerless. Kabyle with its powerful council of priests was far, far away. Not that they'd intervene anyway. As ruler of the Maedi and high priest to the rider god, Kotys was the one with all the power. She managed a stiff little bow. Kotys' lips twitched in contemptuous amusement. 'We will speak again,' he said in a grating voice. 'Shortly.'

With trembling hands, Ariadne carried the basket to the temple doors, where she set it down. She lifted the heavy bar which held the portal closed, letting the light flood in to the dim interior. The moment that Kotys was gone, she let out a shuddering gasp. Her knees felt weak beneath her, and she fumbled her way to one of the benches that sat against the side walls. Closing her eyes, Ariadne inhaled deeply and held it as she counted her heartbeat. At the count of four, she let the air out gradually. Dionysus, help me, she begged. Please. She continued to take slow breaths. A vague sense of calm crept over her at last, and some of the tension left her

shoulders. A lingering fear remained in Ariadne's belly, however. It would take far more than prayers to stop Kotys taking matters into his own hands. She felt utterly helpless.

A discreet cough interrupted her reverie.

Ariadne turned her head. The figure in the doorway was outlined by sunlight, preventing her from recognising who it might be. Needles of panic stabbed through her before she regained control. Kotys or Polles would not be so polite. 'Who is it?'

'My name is Berisades,' said a respectful voice. 'I'm a trader.'

Ariadne's professional mien took over. 'Come in,' she commanded, gliding towards him. Berisades was a short man in late middle age with a close-cut beard and deep-set, intelligent eyes. 'You've been on the road,' she said, eyeing his green tunic and loose trousers, which were covered in dust.

'I have come from the east. It was a long journey, but we made it without too many losses. I wanted to offer my thanks to the god immediately.' Berisades tapped the purse on his belt, which clinked.

Ariadne ushered the trader forward to the stone altar. Behind it, on a plinth, was a large painted statue of Dionysus. In one hand, the bearded god held a grapevine, and in the other a drinking cup. Waves lapped at his feet, showing his influence over water. A carved bull with the face of a man stood to one side of him while a group of satyrs cavorted on the other. At his feet lay bunches of withered dry flowers, miniature clay vessels containing wine and tiny statues in his likeness. Light winked off pieces of amber and glass. There were long razor clam shells, ribbed cockles and, most prized of all, a rare leopard cowrie shell.

Kneeling, Berisades placed his pouch amongst the other offerings.

Ariadne retreated, leaving him to his devotions. An image of a leering Kotys filled her mind's eye at once, and her spirits plunged. She could see no escape from him and despair overtook her. Thinking that meditation would make a difference, she closed her eyes and tried to enter the calm state that so often provided her with insight into the god's wishes and desires. She failed miserably, instead imagining Kotys manhandling her on to his bed.

'What do they call you, lady?' Berisades' voice was close by.

With huge relief, she jerked back to the present. 'Ariadne.'

'You weren't here when last I visited.'

'No. I arrived here six months ago.'

He nodded. 'I remember at the time the old priest not being that well. Still, you're young and healthy. No doubt you'll be here for many years, to gladden the eyes of every grateful traveller wanting to pay his respects.'

'You're very kind,' murmured Ariadne, cringing inside. *If only you knew the truth.*

'It won't be long until the next pilgrim arrives, by the way.'

'No?'

Ariadne was barely listening. She was already worrying about Kotys once more.

'I met a warrior yesterday who was returning here. He'd have come in with us, but his horse is lame. Spent years in the Roman auxiliaries, apparently. He wants to give thanks to the tribe's gods for his safe return. A quiet man, but he put himself across well.'

'Really?'

replied Ariadne vacantly. She had little interest in the return of yet another tribesman who'd served as a mercenary for the Romans.

Berisades could see that her mind was elsewhere. 'My thanks, lady,' he muttered, withdrawing.

Ariadne gave him a bright smile. Inside, however, she was screaming.

As they climbed the slope to the palisaded settlement, old memories came flooding back. Hot summer days swimming with other boys in the fast-flowing river that ran past one side of the village. Herding the sturdy horses that served as mounts for the wealthier warriors. Hunting for deer, boar and wolves as a youth among the peaks that towered overhead. Being blooded as a warrior after killing his first man at sixteen. Kneeling in the sacred grove at the top of a nearby mountain, praying to the rider god for guidance. The hours of his life he'd spent wishing that his mother had not died birthing his sister, a babe that had lingered less than a month in this world. The day he'd heard the news that Rome had invaded Thrace. Riding to war against its legions with his father Sitalkes, brother Maron and the rest of the tribe. Their first glorious victory, and the bitter defeats that followed. The agonising death of Maron, a week after being thrust through the belly by a Roman sword, a *gladius*. The subsequent vain attempts to overcome the Roman war machine. Ambushes from the hills. Night attacks. Poisoning the rivers. Unions with other tribes that were undone by treachery or greed, or both.

'We Thracians never change, eh?' he asked the stallion. 'Never mind what might be best for Thrace. We fight everyone, even our own. Especially our

own. Unite to fight a common enemy, such as Rome? Not a chance!' His barking laugh was short, and angry. The first part of the task his father had set him – serving with the Roman legions – had been completed. He had anticipated a period of relatively normal life before attempting the second part, that of trying to unify the tribes. It was not to be. The dark cloud of war with its bloody lining had found him yet again. Yet he did not try to ignore the adrenalin rush. Instead he welcomed it. *Kotys killed my father. The treacherous bastard. He must die, and soon.*

Used to both his soliloquies and his silences, the horse plodded on behind him.

Two sentries armed with shields and javelins stood by the walled settlement's large gates. They peered at him through jaundiced eyes, muttering to each other as he approached. Few travellers arrived at this late hour, in such bad weather. Even fewer possessed a mail shirt or tinned helmet. Although the newcomer's stallion was lame, it was of fine quality. It was also white – the colour prized by kings.

'Halt!'

He came to a stop, raising his left hand in a peaceful gesture. *Just let me in without too many questions.* 'It's an evil evening,' he said mildly. 'After paying respects to the rider god, it's one to spend by the fire with a cup of wine.'

'You speak our tongue?' asked the older guard in surprise.

'Of course.' He laughed. 'I'm Maedi, like you.'

'Is that so? I wouldn't recognise you from a dog turd,' snarled the second sentry.

'Me neither,' his comrade added in a slightly more civil tone.

'Maybe so, but I was born and raised in this village.' He frowned at their scowls. 'Is this the best welcome I can expect after nearly a decade away?' He was about to say that his name was Peiros, but the first guard spoke first.

'Who are you?' He peered at the newcomer's arms, noticing for the first time the spatters of blood, and then back at his face. 'Wait a moment. I know you! Spartacus?'

Shit! 'That's right,' he replied curtly, caressing the hilt of his sword.

An incredulous grin split the older man's face. 'By all the gods, why didn't you say? I'm Lycurgus. Sitalkes and I rode together.' He threw a warning look at the other guard.

'I remember you,' said Spartacus with an amiable nod. The stare he gave the second sentry was far less friendly. Mortified, the warrior took a sudden interest in the dirt between his feet.

'Things have changed since you left home,' said Lycurgus unhappily. 'Your father—'

'I know,' Spartacus cut in harshly. 'He's dead.'

'Yes.'

He couldn't help himself. 'Died in suspicious circumstances, I hear.'

Lycurgus glanced at his companion. 'Neither of us had anything to do with it. Polles is the one you want to talk to.'

'Polles?'

'The king's chief bodyguard.' The distaste in Lycurgus' voice was clear.

'What about Getas, Seuthes and Medokos? Are they still alive?' he asked casually.

'Oh yes. They've fallen from favour, but they keep their noses clean so Kotys leaves them be.' Aware of the dangerous undercurrent to their conversation, Lycurgus licked his lips. 'Are you . . .?'

Spartacus acted as if he hadn't heard. 'I'm tired. I've been on the road for weeks. All I want is some hot food in my belly and a drink with my old friends. The king can wait until tomorrow. He doesn't need to know that I've returned until then.' *By which time, gods willing, it will be too late. Now that these two know my identity, I've got to act at once. Getas and the others will help.* 'That's not too much to ask, is it?'

'O-of course not,' stammered Lycurgus. He glared at his companion.

'We won't say a word to anyone.'

'Not a soul,' warned Spartacus. Hearing the sudden chill in his voice, the two guards nodded fearfully.

'Good.' Pulling a fold of his cloak over the lower half of his face, Spartacus walked by without another word.

'You fucking idiot,' hissed Lycurgus the instant that he had vanished from sight. 'Spartacus is one the deadliest warriors that our tribe has ever seen! Be grateful that he was in a good mood. You do *not* want to piss him off.'

'What is he planning?'

'I don't know,' snapped Lycurgus. 'I don't want to know. If anyone asks later, we didn't recognise him. Understand?'