

CHAPTER ONE

February, AD 57

Blue-green, iridescent, gleaming in the hazy sun, the peacock feathers shone out at me from a stall in the heart of the market.

The feathers were glorious; bright motes of summer in this place of winter greys that spawned unexpected memories of bright Macedonian mornings, of flower meadows and foaling mares, so that I was left floundering like a landed fish, gagging on the stench of rancid seal fat and gathering stares from the almond-eyed, flat-faced men of the Hyrcanian market.

They despised me; I hated them: these things were taken for granted, but I had never previously made a fool of myself in their presence. That I had done so now gave me yet another grievance against Sebastos Abdes Pantera, the man who served as my superior officer while we remained in this foreign land, and who had sent me, Demalion of Macedon, born a better man than Pantera might ever be, on a slave's errand.

The familiar sting of ruined pride brought me to my

senses. I blinked away the memories, snapped shut my mouth and, as I had been ordered, paid over a silver coin for twelve peacock pinions; six from the left wing, six from the right.

The trader tested the silver between his teeth before he parted with the feathers. His eyes were gimlets of suspicion, buried in the folds of flesh that made his face. His beard was brightly black, oiled with fish oil or seal fat or whatever repugnant mess it was that the men here used to keep the frozen sea-wind from splitting their faces.

I still shaved every day, and kept the cold from my skin with olive oil. The Hyrcanians deemed me no better than a woman for it and were only restrained from saying so because Pantera and Cadus did the same, and Vilius Cadus was a foot larger in each dimension than any of them, hewn from raw granite, with a pugilist's fists and a nose yet unbroken. None of them dared offend him.

Whether they would have been as impressed had they known Cadus was a Roman, indeed that he was centurion of the Vth Macedonica legion, favourite of the late Augustus, was an open question. Nobody knew Cadus was a centurion just as nobody knew I was his clerk. Here, we were Greek freemen, no more than bodyguard and scribe to Pantera the horse-trader; necessary parts of his subterfuge.

Pantera had a lot to answer for.

'Archer! Arrows?' The fat-faced trader was trying to make conversation. His Greek was appalling; he chopped the words as if his teeth were hatchets, and murdered the vowels.

I forced a smile. 'Not me.' I made gestures to fit the words. 'These are for Pantera,' and, at the man's incomprehension, 'for the Leopard.'

'Ah!'

The Leopard was their friend, or so they thought. He brought them amber from the far frozen ocean to the west, balsam from the southern deserts, pearls from the

Mediterranean that were larger, more lustrous than the ones from the Hyrcanian Ocean on whose shores they lived. Better than all these, he brought horses from all over the world; fast, good, tough horses that might survive a Hyrcanian winter, and carry their owners on many hunts through the balmy, rain-blessed summers.

‘Give these!’ The man thrust a fistful of whole raven feathers into my hand. ‘Good arrows. Go fast. Kill many bear!’

‘I’m sure.’ I pressed my fist to my forehead, and remembered to bow as I backed away. Leaving, I wondered if the men here could read minds, or if it was always the case in Hyrcania that some shafts were fletched with peacock flights and others with raven, for I had been sent to buy both.

The peacock flights were required, so I had been told, for the lighter arrows that Pantera had fashioned through the morning, while the raven feathers were destined for the heavier shafts, with the barbed iron flanges at the tip, designed to stop a bear or a boar.

In Macedonia, where I had grown to adulthood, we had used goose feathers for the lighter arrows and swan for the bear-hunters, but nobody had asked me what I thought and I had not volunteered the information. Rather, I had been stunned that Pantera had bothered to tell me anything useful at all; for the past six months he had told me precisely what I needed to know to get through each day and no more.

Cadus always seemed at least three steps ahead of me, but he was my centurion, and while he had never once used that to hold me to silence, I was too young to ask anything, too deeply imbued with a legionary discipline that did not allow a man to question his superiors, too in awe of his battle majesty: I was nineteen years old, a conscript with two years’ training behind me, and I had not yet drawn blood.

My lack of a kill, more than anything, was what I read in the flat stares of the Hyrcanian men. In this land – in all of

Parthia, as far as I could tell — the boys killed a man or a boar or they died trying. Those who lived became men in that single act and were given women and horses to prove it. If a man was mounted, it was because he had taken at least one life in battle or in the hunt; and everyone rode.

I despised myself for my weakness. I may have dreamed all my youth of life as a horse-trader like my father; I may have railed against my conscription and loathed the legions on principle, but even so, every morning in this place I cursed my lack of valour and every night, when I slept, my traitorous mind brought me dreams drenched in the blood of our enemies as my comrades in the Vth launched themselves into battle, taking risks, winning glory, rising in the ranks, killing the enemy and so becoming men . . . all without my being there.

The fact that it was winter, when the weather forced a kind of peace on both sides, and that my comrades were currently enduring endless forced marches over the mountains in western Armenia because their general had deemed them unfit for battle, did nothing to hamper my fantasies.

The Parthian merchants were staring at me still. I shook my head clear of imagined gore and continued on through the market, past the reeking stalls of dried and smoked fish, past bushels of shelled nuts that smelled of autumn and threatened more memories, past pickled eggs in stone jars and skinless seabirds packed in salt-barrels.

Near the shoreline, I found the stall marked with the red-stained ewe's hide where waited a bundle with my name on it that I had orders to open on the spot.

Inside, I found a tunic made of fine undyed lamb's wool, and trousers the same, and boots that might have been made of bearskin and a belt that certainly was, and a silver brooch the size of a duck's egg to pin the woollen cloak that was wrapped around the bundle.

All of this was my gift from the new, young, extravagant King of Kings, that a horse-trader's scribe might attend a day's hunting in the royal party without offending the royal proprieties. I should have been grateful, but I had had enough of Hyrcania and was churlish enough to disdain it as no more than my due.

When I returned to the tavern – in Macedonia it would have been counted less than a shack and free men would not have deigned to enter – neither Pantera nor Centurion Cadus was present.

They did not return that day, but both were there when I woke the next morning. Cadus lay on his back on the straw pallet, sleeping with the peace of a man who knows that the legionary watch-horns have no power to rouse him.

Pantera, as always, was awake. He sat near the window, fletching the last of his arrows by a thin, grey light that bled in past the shutters.

Pantera the Leopard, trader and friend of traders; Pantera the Roman spy who claimed to have come from the emperor himself, and had letters enough to persuade a legionary commander in Oescus to give him two men; Pantera, who had picked me from four thousand others because, alone of my century, possibly of my cohort, perhaps of my legion, I could read and write Latin as well as Greek.

Out of habit, I cursed my mother's father, who had paid for the tutor, believing that all his grandsons should be literate. For good measure, I cursed my father, and my father's father and all the way back up the line to the misbegotten son of a she-ass who had sold the great Bucephalos to Alexander and thus guaranteed that his descendants would be horse-traders for ever more.

Because that was the other thing that had sealed my fate: Pantera might conceivably have been able to find another scribe in one of the legions who could write Greek and Latin

with equal ease, but there was none who also had a lifelong eye for a horse, and could ride as well as he could march; better, in my case.

I chose not to think about that; like Macedonian mornings, some things were best remembered through a haze. I drew in a breath and tasted ice on the air and threw back the bed-hides, so that I might not be tempted to stay long in the warm.

‘You can open the window,’ I said. ‘It can’t get any colder in here than it already is.’

‘It may even be warmer outside,’ said Pantera. ‘They say spring throws itself on a man fast here, like a woman in drink, and you can never tell when the sun will outweigh the chill.’ He threw open the shutters and leaned on the sill to finish his work. His tone was mildly pensive. ‘Have you found the women forward here?’

Surprised, I laughed aloud. ‘They wouldn’t dare. Fathers give their girl children in marriage to their friends the day after their first bleeding, and if a woman looks askance at another man she’ll find herself spreadeagled on a cartwheel and that cart pushed into the sea.’

‘That’s what I thought. It must be the women of other nations who are forward.’

The new light showed Pantera dressed in a tunic of the same fine-woven lamb’s wool as the one I had collected from the market, except that it was black, so that the silver brooch — his was the size of a child’s fist and bore amber at its centre — was shown off more brightly.

I watched him tie off the last of the arrows; a raven’s wing flight on one of the heavy bear-killing shafts. He lifted it and it vanished and I, still sleepy, was transported temporarily to childhood, mouth agape, a little worried, a little charmed by his sleight of hand, until he stood and his good black cloak flew a little with the movement and I saw that the entire

quiver hung from his hip and he had not performed magic at all. The peacock flights outnumbered the raven by two to one. In my disappointment, I counted them, and tried to think what the quarry might be.

Pantera had no thought for me. He had turned to look east, towards the place where the lowering sky pressed down on the leaden sea. The flat, crushed sun cast him in sulphur and citron, gilding his hair to the rich red-gold of the Gauls, and the peacock flights at his hip became as living jewels, ablaze with ice and fire in their hearts. By a trick of the light, his hands were a god's hands, and his face, caught on the three-quarter turn, held a like divinity.

It was more than a morning in Macedonia, that look; it caught me deeper, and twisted harder, so that I caught my breath.

Hearing it, Pantera turned fully round, one brow raised. This once, his features were clear, his gaze steady over a mouth that could hold a thousand expressions and currently held none, and in that moment it seemed to me that I saw the true man for the first time in half a year of looking; and that Pantera was taut as his own strung bow.

I looked away, down, at my hands, at my feet, at Cadus, rising muzzily to waking. When I looked back again, Pantera had stepped away from the light and was the Leopard again, lost in the lazy shadows that clung to the room's margins; a man neither big nor small, with hair the colour of the brown bears in the forest, and eyes the brown-green of a river I had swum in as a child. Like that, he could have walked into a crowd and men would barely have noticed he was among them. I had seen him do exactly that.

'Are you ready?' he asked. His voice did not sound tight. I thought I had imagined the tension, perhaps had wanted it to be there.

‘As much as I ever am.’ I stood at the window and let the freezing air knife into my lungs, let it pare away whatever impossible longing might have taken root.

I made myself read the land, as I had been taught. To the north, layers of cloud lay draped across the horizon in a way I had come to know these past six months.

‘Besides snow,’ I asked, ‘what should I be ready for?’

‘For a hunt such as you have never known.’ Pantera’s smile was bright. ‘Whatever happens, do exactly what Cadus tells you. His job is to keep you both alive.’