

Chapter 41

The next day after her law class ended, Zenobia overheard several of the students discussing betting on some kind of contest. She sharpened her ears and feigned indifference as she slyly drew a little closer to the group.

Haji was talking, "Several of the desert tribes from Arabia are sending entries, and there will be at least one each from Palestine and Ethiopia. Of course, most of the local breeders will enter their own best, and the race normally draws from Memphis and a few other Egyptian cities. We can form our own pool or use a betting establishment in the city."

She couldn't help herself. Joining the group she asked, "For what?"

"To bet on the race next month," he said.

"What race?"

"The annual horse race in Alexandria," answered Aquet. "It's held a few days into the break between semesters. It's a really big event, and a lot of people bet on the outcome. Don't tell us you are into betting, Zenobia."

"No, I'm not. But I do like to race my horse."

Her classmates all burst out laughing. Finally Haji explained, "This is not just a normal desert race for fun, Zenobia. Wealthy sheiks and businessmen enter highly bred stallions in this race for a prize of ten thousand denarii. It's serious business. And it's not just about money; it's even more for fame and prestige. I'm afraid you wouldn't stand a chance." He chuckled again.

"O," was all she said.

At the meal that evening Zenobia casually asked, "Have you heard of the big horse race that is held here every year?"

Cam and Zelina shook their heads, but Salim said, "I have." He appeared to be stifling a smile.

"What have you heard about it?" she asked innocently.

Her mother was not fooled for a second. "Don't even bother to think about it, daughter!"

"I was only asking," she protested.

"Right. But I know what comes next! Forget it."

"I was actually thinking about it myself," confessed Salim. "We have a tremendous horse."

“We?” said Zenobia.

“That is a sport for men!” Zelina exclaimed. “Not for girls.” Even as she said it, she realized her mistake.

“First,” countered Salim, “this is a long distance race, so men are not the riders, boys are, because they are lighter. Second, I suppose I’m light enough to race Bethy myself.” He glanced at Zenobia.

“You could,” she replied simply, “except she won’t be available.”

“I’m stronger,” he suggested.

“But I’m lighter.”

“Cam,” Zelina appealed. He only raised his eyebrows and took another bite of vegetables. “We do not need this,” she insisted.

“We?” said Cam. He took a sip of wine.

Zelina was exasperated. “She is here for an education, brother!”

“Learning has many aspects, my sister, as you and I have discussed repeatedly in the last thirty years. This race could be a valuable experience.” Especially if it’s a humbling experience, he added to himself.

“The prize is ten thousand denarii,” Zenobia remarked.

“It’s not worth a broken leg or neck!” Zelina fumed.

“Actually, it might be worth a broken leg,” observed Salim. “It’s a lot of money, and she owes Saladir more than that. She may as well start earning some of it.” He broke off a piece of bread.

“I can’t believe you men can eat when we are considering such a serious subject,” Zelina objected. “This merits our full attention.”

“Believe me, Mother, it’s not a problem for them. They can do both at the same time. I’ve seen them snacking on dried fruit while stalking lions!” She took another bite herself.

“That is so reassuring!” Zelina sighed caustically. “Three males against me, the lone female – what do I expect? I am going to read.” She got up and left, then she returned for her wine and left again.

It must be that time of the month, Cam grumbled to himself.

“Don’t even say it,” Zenobia said with some irritation, “I know what you are thinking.”

Cam only shook his head. Then he said quietly, “Find out the details of the race, Salim, but keep it between the three of us for now.”

Later, alone on the balcony, Zenobia silently told herself in a mocking voice, You wouldn’t stand a chance, Zenobia! and Horse racing is for men, not for girls! Then she shook her head in frustration and snarled like a leopard. The three horses in the courtyard below turned in unison and stared at her.

“Here is the actual course, however we won’t be training here until the final week before the race,” Salim explained to Zenobia.

“It is usually held in the same place every year because all the small hills offer good views for the poor people. The well-to-do citizens will be in the stands, along with the governor, various generals, officials, and owners.”

Zenobia stood still looking up at the empty stands. What will it be like to see this full of spectators? she wondered. And what will it be like to be in the race? She breathed deeply, and she could feel her heart start to pound.

“If we are going to do this,” Salim said interrupting Zenobia’s thoughts, “we need to put Bethy on an intensified work schedule starting today. As I told you before, I am willing to ride her, but she needs to get in shape.”

“I appreciate the offer, Salim, but you know I want to run this race myself. However, I am asking for your help in building up her stamina. I’m too busy with classes to run her every day.”

“Cam said that the exercise program will have heavier days and lighter ones. This is a lot of work, Zenobia. Are you sure you want to add this to your already heavy class load? Our sword practice will also have to be suspended.”

“How many chances at a race like this will I get? We never had this big a race around Tadmor, and next year either Bethy or I may be pregnant. I know it’s not the ideal situation, but I want to try the exercise program for at least a week to see if I can hold up.”

“Pregnant? Do you have a husband picked out?”

“No, Salim, I do not!”

She definitely sounded annoyed, he thought. “Don’t get mad at me,” he objected, “you’re the one who brought it up!” He had to bite his tongue to keep from saying more.

“I’m only saying that the next race is over a year away and a lot can happen by then.” She softened her attitude then and

conceded, “If it turns out I can’t manage the training schedule, then you will have my permission to ride her. Deal?”

He nodded reluctantly, “Yes, we have a deal.” It took all his self-control to keep from extending her another offer.