

## Chapter 2

Zelina and Zenobia made their way to the council tent, where all the business and political affairs of the camp were carried out. The evening meal was finished, and although it was the third hour of the night, no one was preparing for sleep. The whole camp had heard of the nine-year deceit and would await news of the fate of the mother and daughter. Zelina's friends were not optimistic, and some of the rival wives were hoping her anticipated fall would open the way for their ascent to the unofficial position of chief wife.

Zelina had skipped the evening meal. She did not expect the gods to give favorable note to her fast, but one never knew. The sacrifice couldn't hurt. Zenobia had eaten like she would never see food again.

The desert air was cool now, but the sand still felt warm beneath their feet. A gentle breeze was blowing, bending the flames of a few torches that lined the way. The air still carried the faint smell of spices from the evening meal, mingled with the scent of desert flowers and domestic animals. The stars sparkled against a dark velvet background.

This was Zelina's favorite time of day. She was a sensual woman, and she appreciated the varieties of fruits, breads, meats, spices, and wines that successful trading brought into the camp. The evening meal was always special to her, although tonight she had skipped it. Usually she enjoyed the social interactions at night, the conversations and intellectual jousting, especially when outside around the campfire. She wondered if she had enjoyed those for the last time. If so, she accepted it, for she had had a good life.

"May the gods be with you both," someone called out, breaking the spell. Zelina did not reply but inwardly thanked whoever it was.

Zenobia was tempted to respond. Sensitive to her mother's mood however, she also kept silent. She did not understand her mother's concern. Are we not just following the direction of the goddess? And will the gods not, therefore, protect us?

While the council awaited the arrival of their last few associates, the talk was animated.

"I don't like a girl beating up on our boys!" said one.

"Except for Harrab," said another. "He's a fool! Anyone who can instill some humility in him deserves the camp's gratitude."

"He'll have the body of a warrior, with the brain of a herdsman," agreed another. "And he's already got the manners of a wild boar."

"I heard that he sneak-attacked her, yet she took him down in seconds. That girl is tough!"

“It’s her mother that concerns me.”

Zabbai opened the meeting. He first addressed the council, most of whom by now knew of Zelina’s subterfuge. He explained her vision and her claim to be following the orders of the gods. This was new information to them. Some were impressed, others skeptical.

“She should be executed promptly,” said an elderly councilman. “She has violated our traditions. We cannot tolerate insubordination from our women.” A few murmured in accord.

“If the gods want her, let’s give her to them,” another added. Most of the council remained silent and looked to the sheik.

The sheik looked at Cam. Cam spoke little at council meetings, but he was held in esteem for his wise and careful counsel. He stood up slowly and deliberately. “Tradition shows that those who defy the gods do not fare well,” he said, and paused for emphasis. There were some stirrings of agreement at this. “We risk bringing calamity on ourselves and our camp if we act contrary to the instructions of the gods.”

“Do you believe Zelina, then?” someone asked.

“That is for this council to judge. I myself will withhold my answer until I have more information. However, accounts like this have been heard before.” He paused again for effect. “About Solomon of Israel, Alexander of Macedonia, and Cleopatra of Egypt, for example.” He smiled inwardly at the reaction of the council to these names, but he maintained a deadly serious exterior. “Let us bring her and the girl before us. If the gods have destined the daughter for greatness, it should be obvious to us all.” The woman and her child were summoned.

Zenobia knelt with her mother before the sheik. They were robed, shawled, and veiled, about 10 paces in front of him. Zenobia was filled with nervous energy. She was confident, but she knew she was, in effect, on trial. She had, of course, been well-trained for this meeting, but she had expected it two or three years in the future. Now she was razor-edge sharp with anticipation.

Cam was at Zabbai’s right hand, and fifteen councilmen lined the sides in front of them. Zabbai pretended to be occupied with another matter while he surreptitiously studied the females. Then he looked directly at them, and they both bowed deeply, touching the carpets with their foreheads. Zelina started to speak, “My Lord . . .,” but he cut her off with a wave of his hand. His focus had shifted to the daughter, and he dismissed his wife with another hand gesture. He was conscious of his male entourage watching carefully how he handled this.

Zelina had no choice and had to withdraw, but she felt a momentary sense of panic at leaving her daughter alone with the council. Then she acquiesced mentally; it was out of her hands. Let the will of the gods or chance, whichever, take place.

Zenobia had been told to keep her head bowed before the sheik, which she did, but he noticed her nonetheless eyeing him with curiosity. Her eyes seemed to sparkle. She tilted her head momentarily for a better look, then reconsidered and resumed her full bow. Finally, Zabbai commanded, "Come forward!" His voice was gruff.

She approached within a pace of him. Though protocol required her to maintain her bow, she stood erect and looked directly at him. This breach of etiquette irritated him, and it was not missed by the council. After a few seconds, he impatiently motioned her closer. When she took another step, he reached out with both hands and removed her veil, then he peeled the shawl off her head and shoulders. A murmur went through the tent as the men saw her black hair cropped like a boy's.

So, this is my father, she thought as she studied his face, the man who had ordered her death. She had seen him many times, but not this close, at least not that she could remember. He was in his middle fifties, and his hair was black and gray. His complexion was dark, the skin lined and tanned and leathered from the sun and wind. She could see he was still a powerful man physically, but more surprising to her, though she couldn't have said why, she discerned intellect and learning in his eyes.

Zabbai was shocked to note her studying him. Most children found him intimidating up close, but she seemed fearless, only inquisitive. And her eyes were captivating. Upon nearer examination, they definitely did sparkle. Though she had passed for a handsome boy, studying her features he knew she would become a strikingly beautiful woman. If he allowed it. He asked, "What is your name?" though he already knew the answer.

The question interrupted her analysis of him and caught her off guard. "Zenob, uh, Zenobia, my Lord."

"So, Zenobia, you prefer to look like a boy?" Zabbai asked.

"I would prefer to be a boy, my Lord."

Laughter filled the tent at her comment. "We agree with your assessment, Zenobia, but since that is not possible, why this?" He touched her shortened hair.

She wanted to say, To keep you from killing me! She realized it might not be well received. Instead she replied, "To stay alive, my Lord."

This frank reply stirred the group of men. Zabbai felt mildly rebuked, not only by her, but also by the circumstances. Food had been very limited during those times. Many had not agreed with his decision about the baby girls, and he had relented and canceled it after two years. Nevertheless, the disobedience of Zelina could cost her dearly. Women had been exiled or executed for less.

“And are you prepared to learn the ways of a girl now?”

“I have no need of that, my Lord. I wish to be a warrior!”

There was more laughter at this earnest response. Zabbai asked, “What makes you think you could be a warrior, Zenobia?”

“I can shoot out the eye of a boar at 20 paces!”

This produced more chuckles, along with curiosity. It must be an exaggeration, the men thought, but what if it were true?

Cam joined in now and said, in Egyptian, “I bet she couldn’t hit a melon at ten paces!” Again there was laughter. The council was growing more and more intrigued. It was impossible not to be entertained by this girl and the conversation. Zabbai wondered if Cam’s change of language was out of deference to the young maiden.

If Zenobia noted any of this, it did not show. She remained deadly serious. But she almost collapsed the tent when she turned to Cam and said, in perfect Egyptian, “That’s a bet you would lose, my Lord!”

Outside the tent, nearby listeners looked at each other in surprise. They heard the repeated laughter and wondered what could be going on inside. Wasn’t this a life or death matter?

When the roaring had subsided, Zabbai said, “Show respect for your elders, girl!”

Zenobia immediately bowed. “I beg your pardon, my Lords. My mother has counseled me many times about speaking my mind too freely. I know it’s a weakness, and I do really try. I have a lot of work to do on myself!” she said with both charm and conviction. The councilmen glanced at each other, trying to read one another’s reaction to Zenobia.

Zabbai remained impassive and thoughtful. Then he had an inspiration. “I think we have need of a melon. Zenobia, you have a bow?” She nodded. “Fetch it then. Be quick!” She was out of the tent in a flash. The council moved outside, into the main passage, or street, of the camp. It seemed to Zabbai that there was an unusually large number of people outside tonight. They were milling about talking in subdued tones. By now, all had heard that ‘Zenob’ was really a girl.

Zenobia was in her tent like a whirlwind. “It’s going to be alright, mother!” she exclaimed excitedly. Then, as she ran out with her bow and quiver of arrows, she hastened, “I’ll tell you everything later!”

When she returned, the men were in the passage, near a pile of melons. “What is the wager to be?” Zabbai asked, looking at Cam.

“She will be my slave for a year. She will keep my tent, cook my meals, water my animals, and wash my feet.”

Zabbai looked at Zenobia, and she nodded her assent. He continued looking at her, waiting.

Finally she said, with a lump in her throat, “He will teach me the apprenticeship of a warrior.”

The crowd murmured. Cam looked at Zabbai. Would he approve such a thing? They had never taught warfare to a girl. He scanned the faces of the council. No one voiced an objection. Zabbai gave a slight nod to Cam. Cam understood that the decision was passed to him.

“Agreed,” he said.

Zabbai gestured to the melon pile and said, “Pick your melon, daughter.” It was the first time he had so acknowledged her.

Though some were larger, she selected a medium-sized melon, half a cubit in diameter. She walked it down the passage a few paces and set it in the middle. Then she stepped off ten paces toward the council and paused. A crowd lined the passage now. Some had learned the nature of the challenge while she was retrieving her bow.

The cool night air felt refreshing to her. She looked at Cam and smiled softly. Then she stepped off a second ten paces! There would be no lucky shot, no question. She checked her arrows and selected an especially straight one. Next she placed it in her bow, holding it horizontal, the way she always did. She faced the melon and her future.

Somewhere deep inside Zenobia sensed she was leaving childhood behind, and she felt a twinge of sadness. Then she began to shut out the world. The subdued noise of the crowd, the sounds of the domestic animals, the calling of a night bird, all dimmed. She no longer saw the passage, nor those lining it. She did not notice her mother arrive. She did not register the cool breeze. She shrunk her universe until finally there was only a nine-year old girl, her bow, an arrow, and a melon. She drew the bow back, took steady aim and released.