

Chapter 43

Zenobia took Bethy out for training after classes. Shanzar escorted her since Salim was occupied with Cam on business. They went to a public exercise area a short distance outside the city. There were some small sand dunes and hills, which were safer for the horses and thus a popular place for training.

They practiced for half an hour. "I want to build up her stamina next," Zenobia told Shanzar. They rode at a gallop for an hour, alternating between flat terrain and the smaller hills. Soon Shanzar's horse could not keep up, so Zenobia had to circle back periodically to stay within shouting distance. Then she held Bethy back so Shanzar could overtake them. Bethy shook her head in annoyance at this, as Zenobia had expected, but she wanted the mare to practice staying under the control of her rider.

After two hours, Shanzar recommended, "That's probably enough for today. Horses get sore muscles just as we do."

"She still wants to run," Zenobia countered.

"I see that," he agreed, "but it will be wiser to gradually lengthen her workouts, at least, that is what Cam and Salim told me." Zenobia reluctantly nodded, and they headed back to their house, walking the mounts to cool them down.

Several other young riders and a couple of grooms had been watching the Syrians. "What do you think they are doing?" one asked.

"They're looking for rare cacti, Ashaad!" The comment was from an older man who had just joined the group. "What does it look like to you?"

"Race training, Ziba," he answered, subdued.

"Then could it just be possible ..."

"But she's a girl!" a third rider exclaimed.

"And I am in the company of geniuses!" Ziba replied. "It's sonice you boys can identify the two genders. She won't be racing, fellows, she's only here to work out the mare. And the mare won't be running against us. No one would enter a mare against a field of the top stallions in Africa."

One of the grooms said, "That mare appears to be Arabian, yet she's bigger than many stallions."

The other groom agreed. "She seemed pretty fast to me, and she has endurance. I think she wanted to keep running."

“That’s why I’m the trainer and you are the grooms,” Ziba replied, shaking his head. “I’ll find out who she is though.”

The following day Ziba had news for his riders and grooms. “The girl is a Syrian named Zenobia. If the rumors are true, she thinks she is an outstanding archer, but she is definitely not an experienced rider.” The boys all chuckled at this.

Ziba had heard the rumors of the deadly prowess Zenobia displayed when the Syrian caravan was attacked, but he did not mention her reputed kills to his boys. Even though he did not believe the tales himself, he knew that riders tended to be a superstitious lot, and he was not about to provide any stimulus.

“I haven’t found out why she is training the mare,” he continued, “but she would be crazy to go up against the stallions that will be entered in our big race. But maybe she is crazy. If she shows up today, see if you can catch her alone and test her.”

Ashaad grinned and said, “That should be fun!”

However, Salim and Shanzar came instead of Zenobia that afternoon and the next, so Ziba’s boys were disappointed.

The following day, Zenobia and Bethy were ready to head out for training when Salim told her, “I will be detained a while on some business. A provider is late and I need to meet with him. Unfortunately, Shanzar is off with Cam.”

“We’ll go on ahead and start. How soon do you think you’ll follow?”

He shrugged. “Maybe half an hour or an hour. I suggest you do the long run last.” He noted her ever-present sword. “Only two bows and two quivers today, Zenobia?”

She nodded and headed off.

He smiled and thought, She should be safe. I almost feel sorry for anyone who gives her trouble – almost.

Zenobia arrived at the practice area and began the workout with short sprints up the dunes. Then she put Bethy through some control exercises and stroked her repeatedly when the mare did just as her owner asked. She noticed some of the other young riders watching her closely. She rode Bethy at an easy gallop in a large circuit around the area as she waited for Salim. There was no sign of him.

She finally decided to start their long ride, and she turned Bethy toward the open desert and let her have her head.

Ashaad watched the mare come up into a full gallop with no urging from the girl. He motioned to his companion, Carmas, and a third rider, a groom. They began to follow her at a distance. Ashaad had deliberately held his mount back at the practice field, as had the others, so their fresher horses would be able to run down the mare when they chose.

The three followed her for a quarter of an hour. Ashaad observed her and noted with some surprise that the girl was an excellent rider. Today he was on Windstorm, whom Ziba claimed had to be one of the fastest stallions in the world. He intended to test her against his mount, but for now he was content to bide his time.

Half an hour out from the city, Zenobia glanced behind her and confirmed that the three mounted horsemen were still trailing her. There were two chestnuts and a gray. One of the chestnuts was unusually large. Boys will be boys, she recalled her mother saying. She decided to play with them.

Shortly she ascended a rise connected to a medium dune on her left. Descending the rise, she pulled Bethy sharply to the left and began to circle the dune. She kicked Bethy into a sprint and soon completed the circuit, returning to the main trail. She crested the same rise for a second time.

Below, she saw her pursuers kick their stallions as they rounded the dune following her trail in the sand. "Hyaw, Bethy," she said into the mare's ear. Her mount tore after the pursuers, who were now the pursued. The boys paused when they rejoined the main trail and Zenobia saw some indecision as they looked both right and left. The rider on the large chestnut began to circle the dune a second time. Zenobia rode up behind the other two and gave a laugh before she said calmly, "If this was war, you would already be dead!"

The two whirled their mounts around and stared at her in shock. Then the rider on the remaining chestnut moved his stallion toward her as he said menacingly, "Maybe we don't like girls invading our territory." He drew up to her left side. She shrugged her shoulders and answered nonchalantly, "Do I look like I care?"

He bumped his stallion into her mare. "I can make you care."

"I would recommend you not do that again," she said in an unexpectedly low and deliberate voice.

He laughed, turned his horse a bit, and bumped her again as he raised his riding crop. Zenobia's reaction was instantaneous. She drew her sword and slashed it upward in one continuous motion, cutting his right rein and knocking the crop from his hand. A second later, the rider was immobilized in shock as the downward stroke of her sword severed his left rein. Bethy continued forward, guided by foot touches, and Zenobia drew back her sword and gave the stallion a vigorous whack on the rump with the flat of the blade as she yelled, "Hyaw!" The chestnut

bolted and disappeared over the crest of the rise with his rider hanging onto the mane with both hands.

Pulling up to the rider on the gray, she saw he was grinning. He seemed some years older than his aggressive companion, she noted. “Next?” she suggested.

He put his hands up, palms toward her, and answered, still grinning, “Not me; I’m just along for the ride.”

“Tell your friend that he might lose his hands if he tries that again.”

He laughed out loud now and said, “He’s not my friend, but I will relay your message – if I see him again.”

“Enjoy the rest of your ride,” Zenobia said before she rode away.

Ashaad came around the dune for a second time and saw Zenobia riding off. The groom looked amused. “Where is Carmas?” Ashaad asked.

The groom shrugged and said, “Who knows?” He related the event to Ashaad, who could only shake his head in disbelief.

Ashaad made a decision. “I’m going after her. I need to find out just how good that mare is. You locate Carmas and bring him back. If we lose his mount, Ziba will flay us both.”

“Watch your hands!” the groom called after him.

Ashaad saw the girl and the black about five minutes ahead of him. He matched their pace for a while, then he kicked Windstorm and the powerful stallion began to close the gap.

Zenobia glanced back and saw the large chestnut moving up. She held her pace and considered her strategy. Her lead gradually shrank until the chestnut caught them and began to pass them. Bethy reacted without urging from her mistress, and the two horses ran side by side for a quarter of an hour.

Ashaad was careful not to get too close the mare. He did not wish to risk a bump and become a casualty himself. His own muscles were now aching from the long ride. He had to admit that both the girl and the mare had stamina.

When they were ten furlongs out from the training area, Zenobia kicked Bethy gently and the mare began to pull ahead. Ashaad watched for a minute before kicking Windstorm into an all out gallop. Behind him he heard the girl yell, “Faster, Bethy!”

Bethy did not understand the words her mistress used, but she wanted to catch the stallion. The mare shook her head, upset. Zenobia was pulling back slightly on the reins. She said calmly and

quietly, "Easy, girl, let them go." She patted the mare on her neck. Bethy tried to ease up, but she found it hard to be obedient.

Ashaad continued to pull ahead. With three furlongs to go, he put Windstorm into an all out drive and tore into the practice area fifty lengths ahead of his competition. Ziba and Salim both saw the finish.

Zenobia trotted over to Salim and gestured back to the city. As they walked the horses, he said, "Sorry. I was delayed."

She smiled at him and remarked, "Business before pleasure."

"Speaking of that," he asked, "was the ride pleasurable?"

"O, yes," she replied. "It was perfect." When he raised his eyebrows inquiringly, she added, "Details at the evening meal."

Ziba talked with Ashaad and was gratified to hear how Windstorm overcame the mare's five-minute lead and then crushed her on the final sprint. "The mare is strong," Ashaad confirmed, "but she is no match for Windstorm."

Later Ziba talked with Carmas. Then he spoke privately with his groom whose judgement he trusted more than either rider.

"What is your opinion? Is the girl crazy?"

"Maybe, but more likely she is just very confident. If you had seen her wield her sword, you could see why."

"Is she going to race the mare?"

"O, I think so. She loves competition."

"Can she win?" The groom made no reply. Ziba said slowly, "I want your opinion."

The groom was quiet before he said, "Sometimes you get very angry when you don't hear what you wish."

"I know," Ziba admitted. "Not today."

The groom answered, "I followed them for an hour today. The mare has tremendous stamina, and the girl is a great rider. Yes, they can win the big race. Not every day, of course, but on a good day I believe they are a threat to win it."

Ziba was thoughtful before he tested, “That is hard to believe.”

“Yes, it is,” the groom agreed, “so it will be a greater defeat if it happens. You might want to take steps to insure that it does not become reality.”