

Chapter 37

The Syrians had been in Alexandria for two months now, and Zenobia missed the wilderness. “Because of the holiday, I have three days without classes. Why can’t I go hunting this afternoon?” queried Zenobia. “I’ll take Salim if you are concerned for my safety.”

“One, you’re not here to hunt. Two, there are no hunting grounds within a half- day’s journey, and I don’t want you gone overnight.” As her daughter frowned, Zelina continued, “Three, this afternoon we’re going to visit the tallest building on earth, which is also one of the Seven Wonders of the World! We see it in the distance every morning, remember?”

“Finally!” Zenobia exclaimed, somewhat mollified. “I’ve heard a lot about that tower.”

“I’ll fix the lunches while you pack some energy snacks and extra water skins. The climb can be brutal, and this afternoon promises to be very hot.” In an hour they were under way with Salim and Shanzar. Soon they passed the docks, made a turn and found themselves riding on a narrow strip of land that led to the lighthouse. “This looks manmade,” Zenobia said.

“It is,” replied her mother. “For a long time the lighthouse was on an island. The first pharaoh or king after the great Alexander, namely Ptolemy, ordered this land bridge built out to the island over five centuries ago. It’s called the Heptastadion, and it created a harbor on each side of it, which greatly expanded the city’s port capacity while making shipping safer. It’s wider now because the land has naturally built up on the sides of it. You’ll also notice that the ships tied up here are smaller than the ones we passed earlier on the mainland portion of the harbor.”

“I remember you told me that we have Ptolemaic blood in us.”

“Correct. The Ptolemy family was of Greek descent, but they established a dynasty here that ruled Egypt for several centuries. The last ruler of their line was Cleopatra.”

“You have seen all of this before.”

“Yes. More than a quarter of a century earlier, I traveled here with your father and Cam on a trading journey. It was the most exhilarating trip of my life, and it opened up the world to me.” She momentarily traveled in her mind back to those stimulating days, but it was short-lived for they arrived at the base of the Pharos.

“This looks to be as tall as the great pyramid,” Salim proclaimed.

“It is,” agreed Zelina.

“Race you to the top!” Zenobia challenged Salim.

“Not until I pay the attendant,” said her mother. Shanzar stayed behind to guard the horses. Zelina suggested to him that he eat lunch while they climbed. After paying their entrance fees, she said, “I’ll be climbing a lot slower than you two, so go on ahead. Wait for me when you get to the mirror.” Zenobia sprinted up the stairs two at a time with Salim close behind.

After one hundred steps, her thighs were starting to burn and she was panting. She could hear Salim’s heavy breathing right behind her, and she forced herself to maintain the pace. She began the controlled breathing technique that Cam had taught her where she forcibly emptied her lungs through pursed lips and refilled them to capacity by extending her diaphragm downward with an exaggerated push. However, she heard her competitor employing the same tactic.

At two hundred steps she was gasping for air, but so was her pursuer. Her legs were protesting, and Salim started to pass her, but she lunged ahead for another fifty steps. Suddenly he grabbed her ankle, and she toppled forward, landing lightly on the steep steps. “Cheater!” she yelled as he passed her.

“All is fair in love and war!” he yelled back. Her adrenaline kicked in and she tore up the stairs after him and grabbed onto his tunic with both hands and hung on with all her strength. He dragged her up for a few steps and then he collapsed and they both burst out in gasping laughter.

She pulled herself up along side him until their faces were less than a cubit apart. “And which is this, Salim,” she asked with a pant, “love or war?”

He put his hands up defensively and said, “Zenobia ...”

She put a hand on each of his shoulders and pulled herself closer. “Am I making you nervous, warrior?” she asked teasingly, but keeping her voice down. She did not want the sound to carry.

“Yes, you are,” he answered seriously.

“Good!” she said emphatically as she clasped her hands behind his neck. “You have been avoiding me since we climbed the pyramid. Why?”

He tried unsuccessfully to pull away. “Not my idea, I assure you.”

“Nor mine. Have you ever kissed a girl?” She drew her lips within a fist from his.

He suddenly glanced behind her with a horrified expression, and she knew it was her mother. She spun away from him quickly, but there was no one there. By the time she recovered, he had sprinted up the stairs, propelled by something she could only guess at, and she knew she would not catch him. She decided to wait for her mother.

When Zelina reached her daughter, she sat down and puffed, “This seems a lot harder that it did thirty years ago!”

Zenobia reassured her, "It seems to me that you do very well for your age. In fact, a lot of women your age are dead!"

Zelina nodded. "Childbearing takes a heavy toll on our gender. I am fortunate to have a strong body, but then I only bore five children. Also, I have been blessed to have had good food most of my life, and that contributes to health."

Although she had known it years earlier, it suddenly struck Zenobia that she would not always have her mother, and a sadness crept into her heart. Her mother had once been young and energetic, as she herself was now, but she was slowly, if relentlessly, aging. This will happen to me in time, she thought. Thinking about the inevitable losses of the future brought a strange chill to her.

She reached out and took her mother's hand and said, "We take a lot of things for granted. At least, I do. If you had been less courageous, I would not have survived. If you had been less healthy, or less appreciative of education, I would not be in Egypt. I know that I have been blessed, but most of the time I do not think about it."

Zelina nodded with a whimsical smile and observed, "There is a proverb that we only fully appreciate our parents when we become such ourselves. It's not that we are ungrateful; we simply cannot comprehend certain matters completely until we have lived them personally. It is the natural way of things."

Eventually they reached the level of the great mirror. Salim was already exploring, and he was fascinated by the mechanics of the system. The mirror itself nested in a frame which sat on a series of wheels on a wooden platform base. Three slaves pushed on protruding poles to turn it constantly. A central vertical shaft that penetrated the frame appeared to hold the mirror in position as it rotated. A beam of light from above somehow shone down on the mirror and was reflected out through the large windows which ringed the entire level.

"Would you like a description of how it works?" an attendant asked.

"Please," said Zelina.

"I will start at the bottom and move up," he began. "Notice that there is a wood base on the stone floor. That wasn't always there, but the wheels, which are made of iron, wore grooves in the stone. To prevent further wear, a wooden platform was set on the stone, and this is replaced periodically. The wheels are changed less often. The shafts that the wheels turn on are greased daily with animal fat." The two younger Syrians examined the system on hands and knees, while Zelina contented herself to sit off to the side. She had studied this a quarter of a century earlier.

"Obviously, the heart of the light is the large reflective mirror itself. You can observe that there is a slight curve to the surface, which was calculated by our mathematicians, and this enables the

light to be focused with greater intensity. In fact, it can be seen at night for a distance of at least one-hundred sixty furlongs.” Salim whistled at this.

“What is the mirror made of?” Zenobia asked.

“A special metal with a silver coating that is polished when needed.”

Zenobia had been studying the mirror’s frame and she remarked, “It looks like this is designed to be tipped.”

“Correct,” the attendant acknowledged. “The design allows us to aim a beam of light at distant objects.”

“I have heard that the mirror can set an enemy ship at sea on fire,” stated Salim. “How is that done?”

“That is true, but the details of how are a secret we are not allowed to reveal. As you are aware, sunlight can be very hot. Now imagine that concentrated so it is ten or twenty times stronger. It can set wood on fire.” Salim looked at Zenobia and he could see her mind analyzing the possibilities.

The attendant, stimulated by a thinking audience, continued, “When the sun is out, a crystal above catches the light and directs it down a vertical tunnel to the mirror. You can see the bottom of the tunnel over here. It also has a polished interior, so on occasion we have to lower a thin boy by rope down the tunnel to polish it or clean it. Obviously, there is no sunlight at night, so in front of the mirror is a bowl that is filled with burning oil. The flame is sufficient to be visible far out at sea. This also works on cloudy days, provided there is no heavy fog.”

“Do you make full revolutions of the mirror at night?” Salim asked.

“Most of the time we do sweeps of about one-hundred eighty degrees back and forth toward the sea, but once in a while we will do a complete circle. Actually, the operator does what he feels like, but the seaward direction is naturally more important.”

“How many men does it take to lift the mirror out?” Zenobia queried.

“So you noticed that feature, eh?” He sounded impressed. “We use eight strong slaves.”

“And do you put the huge crystal in the same frame?” she pursued.

He paused. “May I ask, how do you know about this?” Zelina and Salim were wondering the same thing.

“One of my professors has studied the Pharos, and I overheard him discussing it with some of my classmates.”

“Hmm,” said the concerned attendant. “I am sorry, but I’m not really free to talk about that. To continue your tour, you will want to take the stairway up to the base of Poseidon. It’s very steep, so please hang on to the hand rail. If you have scarves, you might want to wrap your heads. A lot of birds roost up there. We have some fake owls, but they don’t seem to work very well.”

“You go ahead,” said Zelina. “I’ve seen it so I’ll wait here.”

There was no race this time as the two youths cautiously climbed upwards. Both knew that a slip here could cause a tumble resulting in significant injury. Even though this was a much shorter climb, both were huffing when they reached the base of the statue. They followed the exterior walkway around the base to the city side.

“It is basically the same view as from below,” Zenobia remarked, “but it seems more impressive.”

“I agree, probably because we are outside with no ceiling.” She caught him looking at her wistfully.

“We are a lot alike, Salim,” she offered.

“I know,” he concurred. Then he turned and walked toward the other side.

I will not pursue him, Zenobia resolved to herself. For some reason he is fearful. Maybe I can find out why.

To refocus her mind, she began to study the city with a view to offensive and defensive possibilities. I need to learn how Julius Caesar conquered Egypt, and then how Octavian overcame Mark Anthony in the nearby sea battle, she resolved.

When they got back to ground level, the three sent Shanzar up the tower while they rode a short way off and ate a snack. After eating Zenobia said, “I would like to sit and watch the port activity for a while.” Zelina nodded her assent, and Zenobia walked to the edge of the water. It was hot and she pulled her boots off and sat on a small boulder with her feet in the water. It was a refreshing experience that she had seldom had before. She studied the scene for half an hour and an idea began to germinate in her mind.

“How long does it take to load one of the large grain ships?” she queried.

“I’m not sure,” Zelina responded, “but I believe it must be several days. We could ask. Why?”

“Just curious.”

While she thought on this, Zelina walked her horse into the shade of a tree a hundred cubits away. Zenobia gave a head gesture to Salim and he sat near her. “What is going on?” she asked softly, keeping her eyes on the port.

“Zenobia, you know that I care for you, but a romance between us would not be wise. I’m sorry, but I’m not at liberty to say more.”

“Do you really expect me to be satisfied with that kind of answer, Salim? Would you be?”

He hesitated. “Honestly, no.” She glanced at him and he did not look pleased.

“Cam is behind this, isn’t he?”

He did not answer for a minute, but then he realized that was an answer in itself, so he finally admitted, “Yes.”

She was quiet for a while, slowly moving her feet in the water, gazing down at it. Salim looked at her briefly, as he often did, and again noted how her hips and breasts had filled out nicely. She grew more beautiful by the week, it seemed. How he wanted her!

“I am going to talk to him about this,” she said firmly.

“I wish you success,” he replied with more sincerity than she could know.

Zenobia turned her thoughts inward on the ride back. How am I going to approach Cam on this? Perhaps after an evening meal when mother and Cam are having their wine.