

## Chapter Eleven

Three days after the visit to the Temple of Apollo, Cam, Zenobia, Salim, and Shanzar packed their horses and one pack animal for their hunting trip. From a nearby window two men watched as the Syrians prepared their mounts and departed with the rising sun. "Send the message," one whispered as they retreated into the shadows.

"I want to go after them myself, Father," Ahab objected. "No. I told you, I want you visible around the city today and tomorrow. I do not want anyone to be able to connect us to the killings."

"You have more confidence in these mercenaries than I do. In fact, I would not have paid them any of their fee up front."

"Then you will have to do everything yourself, because you will not be able to hire anyone especially with your ornery reputation! I have been handling matters like this since before you were born. Try to learn from my experience."

The son grumbled, unconvinced.

"I have used the captain many times before, and he has never let me down."

"Anyway," Ahab persisted, "now would be the perfect time to take the house of the Syrians. They have a lot of valuable merchandise stored there."

"It is the ideal time if you have a death wish! Tell me, what exactly did you have in mind to do at the house?"

"Kill the guards and steal the merchandise."

"Of course!" Hasshel exclaimed in mock delight. "Why didn't I think of that? And what next?"

Ahab hated the occasions when his father got like this. "I suppose, Father, we would take the goods to a remote barn and store them there to sell later."

"Brilliant!" Hasshel ranted. "Because it would be really stupid to sell them right away when someone might connect the items with the Syrians. What about Zelina?"

"We might hold her for ransom," he offered tentatively. "Naturally! We would make a profit on every side!" He glared at his son. "Did I not tell you that General Publius was interested in the Lady Zelina?"

Ahab hesitated. "You may have mentioned it."

"I 'may have mentioned it.' Why might I have mentioned it?" Ahab made no reply.

"Let's see if we can figure out why I 'may have mentioned it.' Zelina, although older, is still a strikingly beautiful woman, plus she is intelligent and clever. She is just the kind of woman the general acquires for his mistresses. Now, I wonder how he will feel when she disappears or is killed? What do you think?"

"He might be displeased."

Hasshel laughed derisively. "Could there perhaps be a glimmer of hope for you? So, what

might the general do?"

"Nothing?" his son replied hopefully.

"The glimmer just disappeared. One time out of a thousand he might do nothing. Because he might suddenly drop dead! Or Rome might get into a war with Egypt! But the other 999 times he will do something, and that will be dangerous to us."

"I don't see what he could do, Father."

Hasshel shook his head in frustration. "He could have his agents ask around to see if the Syrians had any enemies. And someone will eventually say that your father was upset at losing the horse race."

"But he would have no evidence."

"You fool!" the father roared. "He has power! He does not need evidence! He only needs suspicion! And you will have given him that by kidnapping the Lady Zelina!"

Ahab cringed while Hasshel tried to calm himself.

"How many trustworthy men do we have who can fight?" Hasshel continued.

"Hmm. Seventeen."

"And how many men does the general have?"

"Two legions."

"Which is how many men?" Hasshel persisted. "Twelve thousand men," Ahab whispered.

"Precisely!" Hasshel whispered back in a deadly tone. "So we are just slightly outnumbered. Next the general sends one hundred of these soldiers over to our house and takes our servants into custody. Then he begins to torture them for information."

"We are Roman citizens. It is illegal for him to have us tortured."

"It is indeed gratifying to see you remember points from your expensive education. So he tortures the slaves first. Then our warriors. Only when he has confessions from them does he finally move on to you and me. And your brothers. And maybe our wives. And all of them die cursing us for our stupidity. And we ourselves die cursing our own stupidity."

Ahab could make no reply. His father put his hand on his shoulder and said, "Son, you are as courageous as a lion and as strong as a bull, but sometimes you are as stupid as an ass. Pray that you either acquire wisdom fast or that I live a long, long life to protect you from yourself. We have a lot of wealth. It would be a shame not to live to enjoy it. "

The four hunters made their way eastward into the delta region of the Nile River. Cam explained that he had heard of an excellent game area there, and he wanted to see for himself. Zenobia was excited to be in the chase with three of her favorite warriors.

For the first half of their journey, whenever they crested a small rise, she could see the Pharos, the famous lighthouse of Alexandria, in the distance. Much of the time, however, they passed near thickets twice as tall as a man, with very limited visibility. She tried to plot their approximate route by the sun, since there were no mountains or high reference points other than the occasional glimpses of the lighthouse.

As they rode, Zenobia described her visit to the Temple of Apollo and the "miracle" of the

rising horses and chariot. She recalled that months earlier at the pyramids Shanzar had claimed, "The scarier your gods are, the more you need their priests!"

He now probed, "Did you figure out what causes it?"

"Sort of," she replied.

Salim chuckled. "Then 'sort of' tell us."

"Longinus does not want it repeated." When all agreed to that she related the full account.

After she finished, Salim observed, "So even your professor does not know what the force is."

"Correct," she confirmed. "Do I detect that pleases you?"

"Yes." Salim could not hold back the smile. *She already knew the answer anyway.*

Cam and Shanzar shot both of them surprised looks. Zenobia saw an opportunity and said, "The conversation that Mother interrupted was almost as interesting."

Cam frowned. His sister had told him the incident at the temple. He decided to observe.

Salim remarked, "This sounds intriguing."

"I think so," she agreed. "I raised the question, Who enjoys the sex act more, the male or the female?" Shanzar burst out laughing, and she thought he might fall off his horse.

"Well," she continued soberly, "it is a provoking question, isn't it?"

This only increased his laughter. "Zenobia ..." he began between laughs, "only you ..." He shook his head.

"Not only me," she insisted, annoyed. "The Grecian gods supposedly dealt with this matter."

"And what did they conclude?" Salim asked.

"That the female gets nine times as much pleasure as the male!"

"Whoa," Shanzar retorted, "that's a bit hard to believe. How did they come up with that?"

"Some guy irritated a goddess and she changed him into a woman; later she changed him back. Since he had lived as both genders, he could settle the issue."

"Maybe he lied," Shanzar pressed. "More likely that never happened."

Zenobia countered, "You have to admit it would be a way to find out."

"I'm skeptical," said Salim. "Let's ask our own expert." He looked over at Cam.

He shrugged. "First, I would say the Grecian myth is worthless but you all expected that. Second, the sex drive seems consistently stronger in males than females, which may suggest but not prove the answer." He paused. "However, I would emphasize that love elevates the experience way beyond the act."

"Can you explain that?" Zenobia asked.

"Certainly. The emotions of loving your sex partner, my wife Sarah in my case, made the event far better than it could have been without love. The sharing is both giving and receiving, and it is both physical and emotional. I know Sarah expressed similar feelings. It seems men and women were designed for each other. I consider sex without love to be incomplete, but that seems ignored in Greek religion."

Then they listened to Cam's account of his latest business trip and what he planned for the

future. “It is more efficient to send large quantities of merchandise back home. However, we have little storage area here. When our warriors are within two weeks of their scheduled arrival, then I want to buy some exotic animals for our caravan, but no sooner unless I find a fabulous deal. It’s too much work to feed and guard them.”

“Our courtyard is about a third full already,” Salim observed. “I have been investigating new sources of spices. They are lighter and easy to transport.”

“Maybe I can go with you on one of your trips,” Zenobia expressed.

“You would be welcome, but your classes are too close together to fit it in.”

Next Shanzar brought up a concern of his he thought that someone was watching their house because he kept noticing a familiar individual in the neighborhood, one who did not live there but came and went at all hours. After some discussion, it was decided that Shanzar would investigate further on their return.

At midday they stopped for a quick meal and a nap before resuming their trek. When riding again, Zenobia drew Bethy close to Salim. He had grown into a handsome young man, muscular, four cubits tall, and sporting a neatly trimmed black beard. “I have missed our conversations,” she began. “It seems we are rarely together anymore, just the two of us.”

He shot her a warm glance as they rode side by side. “I’ve missed you too, Zee.”

“We trained together for years, my friend, and we were close. Of all the boys in training, you were the only one who wasn’t afraid of me.” She paused. “That is, until that day at the Pharos.”

He sighed and shook his head. “That was hard,” he acknowledged.

“No fooling!” she stated. “Especially for me. After all, you were the one who panicked when I tried to kiss you. That did not exactly make me feel desirable.”

“I suppose it didn’t. Honestly, I was too wrapped up in my own emotions to give much thought to your side of it.” He paused. “I am sorry about that.”

“Maybe someday you will tell me the real reason. Anyway, if you agree, I would like to spend more time with you.”

He nodded. “I agree, but someone else may not.” He gave a quick look toward Cam.

“I need to talk with a younger person with a similar background to mine.”

“I assume you are not looking for a romance between us,” he continued with a touch of bitterness, “since you now seem attracted to another man.”

“That is true, and I see that it bothers you. I do not think that is fair, Salim, given our history.”

“You are right, Zenobia, it isn’t fair but I can’t seem to help it. Obviously, I have no claim on you, but ...”

She decided to pursue the matter anyway. “What do you think of Longinus? Can you be objective?”

“Humpf.” He smiled slightly. “No, I cannot. Sorry.”

“Then tell me whatever analysis you can.”

He hesitated. "Anything I observed will probably only confirm what you already know." He saw her hand sign for him to proceed. "Most important, he is captivated by you naturally."

"I know, but why?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Your mind and personality. Of course, you are pretty and athletic, but those would merely be secondary reasons for Longinus. It's your mind, including the way it works or doesn't, on occasion."

"You can be so charming."

"And all at no extra charge," he replied.

She paused before asking, "Is he crazy for being drawn to me?"

"Hah!" he exclaimed. "He would be crazy if he weren't. All men are attracted to you."

"Saladir wasn't," she replied.

"Wrong. He was, but he recognized that he would have no peace with you as his principal wife. He decided it would not be worth it. Not that you would have married him in any event."

"Do you know, Salim, I still haven't kissed a man?"

"You poor creature," he mocked. "It's not like you have time for a romance unless it is related to your classes. Don't worry, it will happen. I promise."

"Thank you. And I do love you, maybe all four ways." She saw his quizzical look and explained, "The Greeks they have four words for it."

By nightfall they had traveled 200 furlongs, and they set up camp in a deep thicket. After a small meal, Zenobia rolled up in her blanket near Bethy. Shanzar had the second watch, which Cam had shortened to three hours, and she was to take over an hour after midnight. As usual, she quickly fell asleep.

Shanzar woke Zenobia for her watch. The fire had burned low and the night air was cool, so she added a few pieces of dried wood. She propped her saddle against a small tree for a backrest, and, using her blanket as a cape, she settled in to think about Longinus. *The problem is exactly as Mother said, she admitted to herself. I love the world of academics, but I want to rule and eliminate injustice.* She paused and reconsidered. *At least, as much of it as I can.*

*Are you sure Longinus is what you want? Or whom you want?* She reflected deeply before she admitted that she was not sure. The wise course would be to observe how their relationship expanded or contracted over the next few months.

At the same time, she felt conflicted in view of her recent feelings for Salim. *He is a warrior like me and he is more practical than I am. Sometimes I feel like he is reading my mind, we are so similar. We would also be a great match, except ...*

Her contemplation was interrupted by a soft noise in the thicket nearby. Instantly her mind and senses went to high alert. She slung a quiver over her shoulder and picked up her bow. She felt the reassuring sword at her side as she crept stealthily toward the sound. It was difficult to see in the thicket with only the stars for light, and it required patience to maintain her caution.

It took her nearly half an hour to draw close to the spot where she judged the rustling had

originated. *It might be a hunting lion.* Then she heard very low voices. *No lion!* She crept closer and strained to hear the conversation.

“How can we attack them now?” a voice whispered. “We can’t even see anything.”

“Then neither can they,” another voice whispered back. “We outnumber them ten to four, plus we would have the advantage of surprise.”

A third man joined, “If we don’t bring the girl back alive, we will have to disappear to save ourselves. It’s too risky when we can’t see. I say we take them tomorrow.”

Zenobia heard them starting to withdraw and decided to kill the three now. Then the soft trill of a night bird startled her, and she whirled to her left, bow and arrow ready. Did she glimpse the shadow of a man? It was hard to be sure. She heard the trill a second time. *Could it be Cam?*

She returned a barely audible trill. She could hardly hear the “Zee” that came in response. She crept silently toward Cam, but still on high alert.

“Well done,” he spoke a quiet commendation. “Not tonight, though. We will deal with them tomorrow when they attack us.” He nodded his head back toward their camp.