

Chapter 25

Zenobia woke up with a pain in her throat and, as soon as she sat up, she began sneezing. Her mother heard her and came to check on her. “You are sick, young lady,” she pronounced.

“But I never get sick, Mother,” she protested. They both heard the congestion in her voice and smiled.

“Almost never, you should make that,” Zelina pointed out. “I’ll get some herbs for you, but this will take at least a few days to heal.” Zenobia took a sip of water and lay back down.

She was almost asleep when she heard Salim’s voice call to her through the tent flap. She caught the word ‘lion’. as he talked with her mother. She was out of bed in an instant and over to the entrance. “What about a lion?” she asked.

Salim looked her over. “At least two lions killed and carried off two of our sheep last night. Cam sent me to get you. He’s getting the trackers and six men ready to hunt them down.” He continued studying her and stated, “It looks like you won’t be going.”

“O yes I will!” she exclaimed and followed it up with a sneeze. “Most of the men are out of camp and you will want everyone available for this.”

“Sorry daughter,” Zelina said quietly, “not this time. I have seen men make mistakes with this kind of illness and die for it. This time you need to do what I say.” She crossed her arms for emphasis.

“I guess that is that,” observed Salim. “I’ll inform Cam. I hope you are better soon, Zee.”

Zenobia looked at her mother and said, “It’s not that serious.”

“Not now, true, but I have seen this sickness become serious really fast. Plan on a week of resting in the tent and another week or two of lessened activity. Sorry, but that’s life.” The patient returned to bed grumbling to herself.

It was late afternoon when Zenobia finally got up and dressed. Her mother had woken her twice to drink some kind of awful tasting stuff, but mostly she slept. Now she felt the need to move around some and expressed this to her parental nurse. “The weather is nice so a short walk should be okay,” was Zelina’s response. “Do not exert yourself though.”

“I won’t. I’m just going down to the corral.” She started out the entrance, but then she hesitated and returned. She decided she did not want to carry the weight of her sword, but she did grab her new bow and a quiver of special arrows. Her mother frowned at her, but Zenobia just shrugged her shoulders. “There are rumors of lions about,” she said with a smirk as she headed out.

She walked slowly to the corral. Julian was the lone guard when she got there. “Why isn’t there at least one more guard with you?” she asked.

He shrugged, “Most are watching over the sheep and cattle, and one is with the camels. There aren’t a lot of horses or camels left in camp, nor men either.” She knew that many were not back from Tadmor yet, and the tribe also had a medium size caravan in route to Antioch.

“Then they should have put the camels and horses together with both guards,” she said. She called Bethy to her for her piece of fruit, and then she went to sit on a rock in the sun by the fence. She briefly considered moving her mare and the rest of the horses to the other corral with the camels, but she had little energy. The warmth felt good to her, but it was not too hot being late in the afternoon. She leaned her arms and head over onto the lower fence rail, and soon she was asleep.

Julian nudged her awake. She was startled for a second until she remembered where she was. It was late twilight and would soon be dark. “The hunters were supposed to be back by now,” he said. “Could you watch briefly while I get something to eat? I’ll be back soon.”

She nodded and added, “If you stop and tell my mother that I will be back in half an hour.” He agreed and she asked, “Did they take torches with them?”

“I think so,” he answered and departed. Then they might not be back soon, especially if they think they are closing in on their quarry. She took her bow off her shoulder and nocked an arrow out of habit. She sat back down, feeling really tired, and her throat hurt. She wished she had brought a wineskin. A quarter of an hour passed uneventfully.

As the last of twilight faded, she heard a restless stirring among the horses. All of the horses were staring past her into the darkness toward the edge of the clearing. They obviously thought they detected something. She went to instant alert, recalling a similar reaction from the night in the forest with the leopards. She peered toward the brush at the edge of the clearing, but she did not have her full night vision yet and she could see only dim outlines of vegetation. The stars were visible, but the moon was not up yet.

It seemed to her that it was unusually quiet in the brush near the clearing, but then she was very tired. She also recalled that her head was stuffy and her hearing would be less acute. She thought she heard a slight rustling of leaves, even though there was little breeze. Maybe she was imagining it. She dismissed the idea and closed her eyes for just a moment.

Suddenly she slapped herself mentally. What are you doing? she chastised. Lions took some of the flock just last night. Nap later back in the tent. She forced herself to concentrate and focus her senses as best she could. The horses grew more restless. She did not feel well and she wished she were not alone.

She wondered if a male lion would let out his thunderous hunting roar. Sometimes on a plain they would put their head down for this tactic, vibrating the soil and making it difficult to tell where the source was. This would cause panic among their prey and it would scamper in all directions, some unwittingly right to the hunters. She decided it was more likely to use stealth near a camp.

Finally as she peered forward, she caught the faint movement of a shadow. She stood up and two minutes later she detected another shadowy movement just into the brush. A strange fear crept up her spine as she realized that she and the horses were being stalked. There were only two possibilities, and both were bad. She wished she had followed her earlier impulse to move the horses deeper into the camp by the camels. For now, she could only wait.

The next sound was a low growling from somewhere. No human could make that sound, she concluded, so at least she did not have to worry about bandits. There must be a group of lions, and one was warning another out of its space even as they prepared to attack. She wanted to give her own screeching leopard yowl to at least warn the stalkers that there was another predator about. She felt it might cause the lions to hesitate. Then she reconsidered. With her sore throat she was afraid that it might convey weakness, and actually stimulate an attack. The moon peeked up above the horizon behind her.

Suddenly it came – a roar reverberating the ground. Jumping up she yelled, “Bethy, come!” She did not want her mare to bolt in panic through the fence and straight into the fangs and claws of a lion. Bethy trotted over nervously and Zenobia said, “Good girl. Bethy, hold!” Several of the horses began to whinny and run around the corral, but Bethy held her place by her mistress.

Zenobia moved into the corral while straining to see into the darkness. Then she saw them – spread out before her three sets of large yellow eyes glowing in the darkness. It was the most threatening sight she had ever seen. She had learned that at night a human could only see the eyes of the big cats when they were focused on the observer and there was a little light coming from behind the watcher. Their eyes must be reflecting the faint moonlight.

Now she could barely make out the shadowy shapes of the three huge cats. She caught a glimpse of movement behind their eyes, and she hoped it was her imagination and not more lions. She instinctively glanced to her left and right. Another set of luminous eyes appeared briefly to her far right. She made an almost involuntary snarl. Not too bad, she thought. The eyes stopped moving. Where is Julian? He and other guards must have heard the roar.

As she watched intently, the pair to her left disappeared and reappeared. It’s flanking us. The eyes to the far right were gone now, but the two pairs of golden orbs straight ahead began to slowly draw closer. She now noticed that one set of eyes was larger, evidently the male. Then the eyes stopped dead ahead. She guessed that the lions were energizing for a charge.

Her decision was calculated and determined in an instant. She drew her bow and shot behind the flanking eyes to her left. She was relieved to hear a yowl of pain and a snarl, as she had hoped. As she quickly placed her next arrow, the smaller pair of eyes ahead suddenly veered away into the night, perhaps scared off by the painful yowl of the wounded lioness.

She was startled to see the eyes belonging to the male grow still larger, bobbing up and down. It's charging! She knew she had only seconds to live. Bethy saw the lion charge and finally bolted. Zenobia aimed below the eyes and shot fast. She grabbed another arrow, rushing to get off a second shot. Then she heard a crash and she was slammed in the chest, fell backwards to the ground, hit her head hard, and lost consciousness.

Zenobia became dimly aware of people with torches around her. Her chest and the back of her head both hurt. Someone was poking and prodding her. "I don't think anything is broken, but she may have a cracked rib or two. She should be all right." It was Cam's voice.

"That is the biggest cat I have ever seen! It must be five cubits long from head to rump!" She did not recognize the voice.

"We hunt for months looking for a challenge like this, and it just walks up to her in camp."

"It wasn't walking, idiot, it was charging!" Salim exclaimed. "Apparently her arrow killed it instantly, altering its leap enough so that it crashed through the fence. Otherwise she would be dead or seriously injured."

Zelina had studied her daughter and heard the comments by Cam and Salim. Now as she gazed at the dead lion and registered its tremendous size, she was overcome by emotion. She dropped to her knees and started to sob uncontrollably. Cam approached, knelt beside her, and put his arm around her. She tried to say something but couldn't get the words out. Finally she managed, "The new bow ... " between sobs.

"It probably made the difference," Cam said softly.

"I...", she said haltingly, still sobbing, "I almost didn't buy it for her in Tadmor. And she almost didn't take it with her this afternoon." Cam could feel her body shaking and he held her tight. A couple of the watching warriors shot questioning glances at each other. Finally her practicality returned and she said, "We need to get her back to bed."

"Soon," Cam promised. He returned to his female warrior trainee. "So you decided to shoot this time," he chuckled.

"Yeah," she acknowledged weakly, her eyes barely open. "I figured it was a male!" He laughed at this. "How is Bethy?" she asked.

"She's fine," he said with a smile. "She was standing by you and nuzzling you when we arrived. That's pretty impressive considering that a lion was lying partly on you!"

Zenobia smiled lightly at this and nodded, and then she added as an afterthought, “I guess the shot was true, huh?”

“Dead center in the chest. It cleaved the heart and buried the arrow up to the feathers. That is a powerful bow.” He was surprised to note a tear in his own eye. When he could keep the tremble out of his voice, he continued, “Your mother would like you back in bed now.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

“Do you have any sharp, strong pains?” he asked. Zenobia winced as she tried moving, answering his question.

“Yes, my head and chest both ache, and my throat is also sore.”

Cam turned to Zelina, “On occasion an injured warrior with a broken bone can be further harmed by careless moving, but I already checked her over carefully and found no serious breaks. However, she probably has some cracked bone or cartilage. She will be in pain for weeks, but I don’t foresee any long term damage.” He gently picked her up in his powerful arms like she was a lamb and carried her to her tent with Zelina close behind.