

Chapter 1

Zelina watched her daughter playing with her brothers. Her child's hair was cut to shoulder length and she wore the garb of a boy. While she was lighter-boned than some of her brothers, her speed and agility were superior, and her toughness was becoming legendary among her peers.

With the help of her trusted servant Rechab, Zelina had been able to conceal her daughter's gender. She was, to all others, Zenob, a boy. Her real name, Zenobia, was never used except in their most private moments. The last of Zelina's sons had left her tent a few years after Zenobia's birth, which made the masquerade easier.

At a surprisingly early age, Zenobia had grasped and embraced the role laid out for her preservation. This lit a fire that would burn deep inside her for the rest of her life, a desire to prove that a girl could be just as valuable as a boy, and a woman just as valiant and skilled as a man.

Naturally, there were a few problems. Girlish traits were subdued in Zenobia, and what little surfaced was overshadowed by her extreme competitiveness. However, she never urinated in the bushes or against a wall with the boys. Nor did she ever join them in swimming naked in a river or an oasis. Her mother and Rechab developed the ruse that 'Zenob' had stomach and intestinal problems, occasionally causing sudden attacks that required immediate remedies and rest in their tent. Zenobia had employed this tactic effectively a few times, but Zelina remained ever alert, ready to squelch any rumors before they gained momentum.

Today, the boys were playing a team tag game. The players passed or ran a fist-sized bag of grain to the opponent's base, in this case a tent pole. Tagging an opposing player carrying the bag changed the possession to the tagger. Though designed as a non-contact sport, collisions were frequent. So were arguments, like the one that now ensued.

"I tagged you before you touched the pole, Zenob!" proclaimed Harrab. He was big for his age, and used to getting his own way, though not with 'Zenob'. He was not above cheating to win, and his recent growth spurt had exacerbated his bullying traits.

"You did not!" Zelina heard the fire in Zenobia's voice and imagined that same fire in her eyes. Her daughter already had a strong sense of justice.

"Are you calling me a liar, Zenob?" Harrab growled menacingly. He gave her a shove with both hands.

Zenobia started to boil inside. He'd missed the tag by at least a cubit, and they both knew it. "That seems like an appropriate word for it," she said casually.

Harrab did not know what ‘appropriate’ meant, but he knew it was an insult. He faked another shove, then suddenly grabbed Zenobia’s shoulders, pulled her toward him, and drove his knee into her groin. She grunted.

What happened next was almost too fast for the minds of those watching to register. Lightning quick, Zenobia delivered a punch to Harrab’s nose. As his head snapped back and his hands flew up in startled pain, she took a step back, measured, and kicked him squarely in the groin. Harrab shrieked and dropped like a coconut, doubled up in a fetal position. A spontaneous cheer went up from the boys and girls watching, for many of them had been victims of Harrab’s bullying.

Even as Zenobia impulsively raised both of her arms in the universal sign of victory, she remembered her mother’s counsel and bent over, feigning intense pain. “Zenob! In the tent! Now!” Zelina’s voice had never sounded harder. Zenobia staggered to the tent, still bent over. It was a great act, but they both wondered if would it be enough.

Inside the tent, Zenobia apologized profusely. “Mother, I couldn’t help myself. I just couldn’t endure it from that pig!” “I know dear,” her mother said as she held her tight. She wondered if it would be for the last time. “You’ve done a great job for many years. I’m very proud of you.”

That afternoon, Zelina was summoned to Zabbai’s tent. She had hoped this day would not come until Zenobia reached puberty. Sheiks had beheaded wives for lesser insubordinations. As she readied herself, Zenobia told her, “Don’t worry, Mother.” Zenobia had fully accepted the story surrounding her birth, and it gave her a tremendous confidence, a confidence Zelina wished she could share right now. “The goddess of the desert that told you to spare me will be with you.” “I’m sure she will, my love,” Zelina lied. Then she kissed her daughter tenderly and left the tent.

Two of the wives had reported their suspicions to Zabbai, and rumors were swirling around the camp. Zabbai and his second-in-command, Cam, were alone in the tent. Zabbai glared at Cam. “You are amused by all this, aren’t you?” he growled.

Cam did not back down. “Yes, I am,” he said matter-of-factly. He never addressed Zabbai as “Lord.” They had grown up together and were peers. They had been in many battles together and were equals in all but responsibility, and they both knew it. Zabbai continued to glare at Cam. Finally, Cam merely shrugged his shoulders and said, “You must admit, surprises do make life more interesting!” He did not bother to suppress a smile. Besides, he thought to himself, something like this should have been expected when you made that stupid decree about the baby girls. They had both seen the ferocity with which a mother bear protected its cubs.

A guard opened the tent flap and announced, “Your wife is here, my Lord.”

“Send her in,” Zabbai barked.

Zelina entered to within six paces of the sheik, dropped to her knees and bowed before him. What has he been told? she wondered.

He remained silent for a full two minutes glaring at the woman bowed before him. He spoke two short words. "Explain! Now!"

As she had feared, her hope of continuing the masquerade was dashed. "My Lord, your son, Zenob, is really your daughter, Zenobia," she said in a contrite voice. She did not raise her head to face him. Zabbai had never seen her so subdued.

"How could you do this?!" Zabbai roared. He was incredulous. She was his favorite wife, both the prettiest and the most intelligent. He liked intelligence in a woman, provided she knew how to keep her place. She also had a passion for life and for him. She must have been desperate to defy him. This reflected negatively on his position as sheik. He continued ranting, "By nightfall the whole camp will know of this masquerade!"

Sooner than that, thought Cam. Half of the camp can hear you right now. He was the only one in the tent enjoying the situation.

"I was ordered to do it, my Lord. The night she was born..."

"Ordered!" screamed Zabbai. "Ordered to disobey your lord and master!" His tone became deadly threatening. "By whom?"

"By the gods, my Lord!"

Clever, thought Cam, extremely clever. He had seen Zelina's mind sparkle at some of the campfire conversations in the evenings. She was witty and intelligent. Can she actually pull this off?

Instantly, Zabbai's demeanor underwent a profound alteration, and he paused in thought. "Explain," he finally said.

Zabbai was rapt with attention as Zelina related the apparition of the desert goddess with long, wavy black hair down to her ankles and a diaphanous full-length gown. It was a vision others had described before, which was why Zelina had chosen it. According to the goddess, the gods had destined Zenobia for greatness, and she was to be preserved alive by disguise as a boy until the appointed time.

"And why was I not told of this?" Zabbai demanded.

"I do not know, my Lord. I only know it was so ordered. I... I hope you might have some insight into why."

"This is absolutely amazing," said Zabbai.

And absolutely impossible to disprove, thought Cam, and, therefore, brilliant. Telling the sheik that his wife had been visited by a goddess and his daughter was destined for greatness was

highly flattering, easily believed. Cam knew it was a ruse, but no one else would. Even any servant women who knew the child's true gender likely had believed the vision story.

Zabbai looked at Cam. He knew Cam had a gift for discerning when someone was truthful or lying. Cam knew his opinion was being solicited, and he knew what he would do. But caution was called for. Sheiks who lost the respect of their council often lost their positions and sometimes even their heads. He would not let that happen to his friend.

"I discern no disrespect to her lord in this," he said. "But let us find out for sure. Bring this girl to the council meeting you called for tonight. Let us see for ourselves what the gods find so special about this young maiden." He hoped Zenobia displayed the quick mind of her mother. She would need it.

Zabbai understood. He nodded to Zelina.

"As you command," she replied bowing as she withdrew.