

Chapter Forty-Three

The following morning Zenobia watched Zageeb's house for two hours before she finally saw his wife, Jasmine, emerge. As reported, it was her typical day to go to the market. Zenobia was dressed in nondescript clothes and veiled and could have been almost anyone, provided an observer didn't study her distinctive eyes too closely. She followed Jasmine at a distance, pausing to glance over the wares of the various vendors. She reminded herself, spies could be anyone, anywhere. She forced her mind to slip into her role for the morning. As Cam had taught, *When assuming an identity, mentally become that identity. You won't have to work so hard.*

Zenobia bought a few pieces of fruit from one merchant and a colorful scarf from another. Jasmine filled her bag and turned into a very narrow side street, and Zenobia drew close. "Keep walking and don't turn around," she said in a low voice in Egyptian. Jasmine stiffened for a second, but she kept her pace.

"I slowed down to let you catch up," Jasmine said, keeping her head forward and taking Zenobia by surprise. "Why have you been following me?"

Zenobia went to full alert. "Where can we talk discreetly?"

"Around the bend is a little shop. You stop there briefly, then follow me at a distance. I'll enter the first temple we come to. We can talk there."

Zenobia considered whether this could be a trap. *How would Jasmine have known to set it?* She carried a dagger and a small sword, carefully concealed beneath her robes, but she was hardly equipped for an attack by more than two or three men. She hesitated before deciding to follow Jasmine.

She obeyed the instructions and paused at the shop, then resumed trailing Jasmine at about 40 paces, finally entering the small temple. Stopping just inside the entrance, her eyes adjusted to the dim light. Jasmine was nowhere to be seen. Zenobia was considering fleeing the scene when a whisper came and a hand motioned to her from a side chamber. She approached cautiously with her hand inside her robe on the handle of her sword.

"We can talk quietly here without being overheard," Jasmine said in a low voice, "and we can view the entrance in case anyone comes in. What do you want?"

Jasmine appeared to be alone and Zenobia relaxed a bit. "How did you spot me following you?" Zenobia pressed.

"You first."

This woman is all business, thought Zenobia. "I bring a message from your husband. He was in serious danger, so he thought it best to 'die.' He anticipates getting you out of the city in a few weeks."

Jasmine was silent in thought. Presently she remarked, "I thought you had likely killed him."

For the second time in a few minutes, Zenobia was shocked. "You know me?" she asked.

"I know of you. We'll use no names here. You are a bit of a legend, you must know. My "business partner" got word to me who he was going after. I didn't like the idea one bit. When he

did not return, I figured he was dead.”

“He almost was. It developed that he was more valuable alive, so we made a deal. Now tell me how you spotted me.”

“I was raised in the alleys of Alexandria, maiden. I can tell who belongs and who doesn’t. I could tell you a few specifics, but it’s basically instinct. You are good, mind you, but not top level. Once I knew you were an outsider, then the few extra glances in my direction told me who you came for. You move like a cat, fluid and graceful, yet constantly watchful, and your eyes are dramatic. That told me who you were. The only question was why. So, Why?”

“Because I said I would. I decided to do it myself for reasons of security.”

The two women studied each other. Zenobia was not pleased that Jasmine knew who she was. Still, she was reassured by the caution the older woman displayed.

“So this danger to my business partner and me was not from you. From whom, then?”

Zenobia made a decision, reluctantly. “Alim Hasshel.”

Jasmine sighed and nodded. “A cruel and dangerous man. I suggested that my partner not have dealings with him, but …” She shrugged her shoulders. “Men often pay no heed to their women. What are your plans?”

“Leave Alexandria. Go back to Tadmor.”

Jasmine laughed skeptically. “Maybe. But not immediately, I think.”

“Do you know a Zacharias? He works for Hasshel and passes information to your partner.” Jasmine nodded. “Could you arrange for one of my men to talk with him this afternoon?”

Jasmine sighed resignedly. “I suppose, though I do not know if it can be today. Some afternoons he is in the jewelry market. Still, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, so I’ll make some arrangement. Give me a way to contact you.”

Almost as an afterthought Zenobia asked, “How many men do you know that you can really trust?”

“How many men can I really trust?” Jasmine repeated Zenobia’s question. After careful thinking, she replied, “None!

Whatever you are thinking of doing, if it requires trustworthy men, forget it!”

The look of controlled, determined intensity on the girl told her that was not likely to happen. *This girl is dangerous, extremely dangerous!*

Zenobia waited a minute before questioning, “Aren’t you going to ask me?”

“No! You don’t know me and I don’t know you. Possession of certain types of knowledge brings danger. I don’t need that!”

Zenobia contemplated her next step. She needed a man with particular skills, and she did not know how to go about finding him. She made a decision. “I *do* know you. You are like the leopardess in the forest that I spared. You are alert, skilled, and intelligent, trying to survive in a perilous wilderness of a sort, the alleys of this city. Therefore, I both respect you and value your opinion. I need your help!”

“Helping you could be dangerous,” Jasmine answered quietly. “Convince me it will be worth the risk.” She liked the girl before her and decided she was willing to be recruited for the

right price. “First, I already promised your ‘business partner’ 100 gold darics. Second, I guarantee you that, provided I survive, I will personally see to it that you are reunited with him. Third, if you wish to settle in Syria, I will be glad to employ the talents of both of you there. You will find that very profitable.”

Jasmine was amazed. “I have heard a legend that you were born to rule. I can see that. I can believe that. What exactly do you want?”

Zenobia thought back to the words of Saladir nine months earlier, *A legend has power*. He had proved to be a valuable and wise ally.

“Hasshel has a ship carrying kidnapped young girls who are to be sold as slaves.” She paused to read Jasmine’s expression and was gratified to see the older woman’s eyes flash with anger. She continued simply, “I want to take it!”

“Of course you do,” Jasmine responded. “I saw that in your eyes.” She took a deep breath and said, “I will help.”

“How do I do it?” It was clear to her that she had another ally, at least for this mission.

“When does it sail? And which ship is it?”

“In three days. Your partner told me I was to be one of the captives. We know the vessel.”

Jasmine considered the options. “You could capture it here in the harbor, but I think that would be too high a risk for several reasons. First, the place is crawling with Roman sailors. Second, there are too many chances that someone would see or hear your attack and report it.

It would be far safer to take the ship in the open sea. What kind of vessel is it, and how large?”

Zenobia was not pleased about sharing the information, but she did not see another choice. “It is a coaster, about forty cubits long.”

“That is helpful. Coasters usually anchor for the night, so you might be able to do a sneak attack. You would want to make your assault early in the morning when the watch tends to be less alert. In any case, you will need a ship, a fast one, to overtake it. Thus, you are going to have to hire the ship, and you need a captain/owner who’s willing to engage in an act of piracy.”

“I don’t consider capturing a slave ship to be piracy.”

Jasmine smiled. “Call it what you wish, maiden, but the authorities would consider it piracy, and they execute pirates for it. I recommend you do not get caught.”

“Good advice. Do you know a pirate with a fast ship?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t suppose this pirate is a woman?”

“No,” she said with a smirk.

“Will he deal with me?”

“What color is your gold?”

“Deep yellow.”

“Then yes, he will deal with you.”

“When can I meet him?”

“I can try to set something up for tonight.”

Early that afternoon, Zenobia, as arranged, met with the military commander at his headquarters. According to her plan, she appeared very depressed. She described the attack briefly to Publius and his adjutant, Arrel, but naturally she left out the part about the young man and Zageeb.

“How many bandits attacked you?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” she replied. “It was near total darkness.”

“Do you know how many you killed?” he persisted.

“Yes, eight. That is, I know I killed at least four myself, but all together it was eight.”

He smiled to himself at this. *Good. All of them*, he thought. “Were you able to question any of them?”

“No. Dead men don’t have much to say.” She looked at the floor.

“Any idea where they came from?”

She cocked her head quizzically. “How could I know that?”

“You might have recognized a face, or you might have gotten an impression of ethnicity or something. Often that’s more of a feeling than anything rock solid, but it can be valid.”

“O.” She shook her head and looked down again. “Nothing. Sorry.” But she found the impression idea interesting and potentially helpful for the future.

“What do you think they wanted?”

“Maybe they wanted to rob us. They probably thought it would be easy.” She gave a wry “Humpf ” at the thought. “Anyone could see we were hunting, not carrying goods.” She shook her head and put it in her hands.

Publius decided to probe. “It is a little hard for a military man like me to believe that a girl barely fifteen could kill four men.” He waited for a reaction.

She bristled at his comment, but she decided that self control was called for. “That’s understandable, Commander. Though I am one of the best archers on earth, you could not be expected to know that. It’s not a typical profession for a girl. There is another factor. Back near Tadmor, we would play stalking games in the bush, one on one, with protective vests and blunt arrows. I became so good that no one could take me, not even my trainer.”

The general’s facial expression left no doubt that he could not accept this evaluation. Zenobia noted his reaction and impulsively invited, “Care to try yourself, Commander?”

He felt his face redden. He wasn’t used to being challenged. Arrel was trying to conceal a smirk. To save face Publius said, “I’d feel like I was taking advantage of you.”

“You’d lose that feeling real fast,” she said. It was just a simple statement of fact. She knew she should have just kept her mouth shut, but arrogance and gender bias always did provoke her.

Publius saw that his aide was losing the battle of self control.

He changed the subject. “Your warrior who was killed?”

“Ahmed.”

“His body?”

“We buried it in the sand.”

“Did you consider bringing it back?”

“No.” When he raised his eyebrows, she added, “I didn’t hear any complaints.”

“But you brought the attackers’ horses,” he observed.

She looked directly at him. “They’re worth money. I brought Ahmed’s horse, saddle, and weapons, too, and anything of value the attackers had.” She looked down and continued, “I’m very practical, commander, even when people are trying to kill me. We buried our comrade, collected the valuables, and headed straight back.”

She appeared very tired, he thought, but still feisty. “I do understand,” he acknowledged. “I’ve lost men in military campaigns. You could find Ahmed’s grave?”

She nodded in answer. If he asked her to do so, she would have to stall him.

“How is your mother?”

“More depressed than I’ve ever seen her.” She looked up now. “I would appreciate it if you could visit her, general, but maybe after a week or so. It might help her.” Publius smiled and said he would be glad to oblige.

After Zenobia left, he asked Arrel, “Do you think she was lying?”

He shook his head. “No,” he answered. “According to reports, she supposedly killed six men on her trip here last year, so it’s probably true. That’s not a woman I would want angry at me.”

Which was exactly what Publius was thinking. He decided to send some soldiers with a tracker and dogs to check it out.

It was mid-afternoon when Salim met Zacharias. “Jasmine said you are partnering with Zageeb.”

“Correct,” Salim nodded.

“Why isn’t Zageeb here himself?”

Salim shrugged. “He has important business elsewhere.”

“What do you wish from me?”

“First, what can you tell me about the slave ship?”

“Not much.” The contact confirmed that the ship was a coaster named “Minerva,” due to sail in three days. However, he could not tell Salim how many sailors or guards it carried, nor was he privy to its ports of call. He perhaps could find all this out, but it could take days and entail risks, for which he would require considerable compensation.

Salim told him that would not be necessary. “Do you know the captain?”

“Yes, slightly. He has been at several of Hasshel’s parties.”

“Any suggestions how we might get a couple of our men on that ship?”

Zacharias laughed and shook his head. “None, sorry.”

“I need a map of the layout of Hasshel’s house.”

“That I can provide,” Zacharias said with his hand out.

After agreeing on the price, Salim gave him a deposit of five gold darics.

Zacharias promised to have the map ready in seven days, and he would deliver it to Jasmine.

When Salim and Zacharias parted ways, Shanzar tailed the contact to discover his personal

residence.

Late that afternoon Zenobia told Salim, "I think we should take Lemuel with us tonight, since he used to be a sailor."

He expressed surprise. "How did a desert warrior ever become a sailor?"

"Ask him sometime. It's an interesting story."