

## CHAPTER ONE

‘Caesarea, pearl of the east. A tinderbox, waiting for the spark.’

Pantera had not spoken in half a day. His voice was dry as the desert. ‘Saulos is there,’ he said. ‘Can you smell him? The danger that hangs around him?’

Mergus edged his horse in closer to where they could talk and the sound not carry on the desert air. He still marvelled that they were there at all, in the desert, half a day’s ride east of Caesarea: when the message-birds had come to the emperor’s loft in Rome, saying that their quarry was moving, that Saulos had finally left the fastness of the Berber lands, Mergus had wanted to take ship then, that night, and be after him.

It was Pantera who had said that they should wait, that they must watch, that there were things left to learn. ‘He must know we’re hunting him. He’ll lead us a dance if he thinks we’re following too close behind. Wait until he goes to ground. When he stops, we’ll hear of it.’

And so they had watched the pigeon lofts at dawn each day and waited, as children for a gift, for each new cryptic line. *Your quarry has entered Mauretania. And left again. He is in Alexandria, buying gifts fit for a king.*

‘Where did he get his money?’ Mergus had asked.

‘He has followers still,’ Pantera had answered. ‘Not many, but enough; men who have denied him and his god and kept hidden, so they can do this for him now. He won’t stop in Alexandria. He’s heading east.’

And then the messages began again. *He’s taken ship, bound for Judaea, or perhaps Syria. He is in Caesarea, pearl of the east.*

And then they had ceased. No more messages, perhaps no more movement. ‘He is cousin to the king of Caesarea,’ Pantera had said. ‘If he’s going to lie up anywhere, it’ll be there.’

‘It’s a trap,’ Mergus had said. ‘We can’t go.’

‘It’s a trap,’ Pantera had agreed. ‘We have to go.’ Hypatia had come away from the dying empress’s side to support him, and Hypatia was, in Mergus’ estimation, the world’s most beautiful woman, and its least available. He was not terrified of her, but he had a degree of respect that bordered on the same thing.

Even so, Mergus had argued with both of them until the point when the emperor had insisted they go and thereby put an end to all debate. In times past, perhaps, men might have reasoned with Nero, but since Seneca’s failed coup, and the bloodbath that had followed it, none had dared do so.

And so they were here, in the desert, riding towards the pearl of the east, outriders to a nondescript, if well-armed, camel train and Pantera had said he could smell Saulos on the wind, which was almost certainly untrue.

‘Here, I would smell him only if he stank of burned sand, horse sweat and camel piss.’ Mergus guided his mare with his knees, to keep both hands free for his bow. As part of his guise, he was paid to guard thirty-two pregnant camels; a fortune on the hoof and food for a desert’s load of jackals. They were presently riding through a gully that ran between two rocky bluffs and was, in Mergus’ estimation, too easy to attack.

He kept his eyes sharp and his arrow nocked, and gave only a part of his mind to the vision ahead, where Caesarea shim-

mered as a spark of textured sunlight on the line where sand met sky and both met the ocean.

It had been there since soon after dawn, but Pantera was right; here, on a nameless track through an unnamed gully half a day's ride from the city, was something different, some fold in the air where the desert's still heat met the first breeze from the sea, and it was not the balm it should have been, but a presage of danger and death.

Mergus' mare whickered and pricked her ears, and stepped out with a new eagerness. He breathed in the altered air, in and in and—

'Bandits!'

He and Pantera called the word together. Mergus' mare knew the threat of an ambush as well as he did; she had come with him from Rome, and before that from the hell-forests of Britain where painted warriors hid behind every second tree. Even as he shouted, she was plunging sideways out of the unsafe gully towards a fissure in the rocky bluff to its northern side.

An arrow sliced the dirt where he had been. A second shattered on the rock that sheltered him and splinters of ash wood skittered across his face. Ahead, a man died, screaming. The stench of fresh blood flooded the noon-dry air. Shadows moved. Mergus shot at one of them. He heard a body fall, then another, and had no idea who had died except that it wasn't him.

'Sebastos?'

Mergus called the Greek name Pantera used among the men of the camel train. He heard no answer. Five more arrows fell in the ten square feet he could see. A cow camel bellowed and toppled to the sand, hard as a felled tree. The three brothers who led the train began to whistle orders in the language only their train knew. Men began to shout: outriders and their enemies alike. The enemy called in Greek, not Aramaic, so they were not Hebrew zealots from Jerusalem come to take the camels for their holy war. A part of Mergus thought that knowledge might be useful later, if he lived.

The rock fissure offered Mergus temporary protection, but after the first few frantic heartbeats it made him a sitting target. Sweating, he slid to the ground, keeping the rock to his right and his mare to his left. From there, he fired twice more but hit no one. He had trained in the bow these past eighteen months and thought himself adequate, but no more than that; he was a blade-fighter by instinct and training.

He slid the bow on to his shoulder and loosed from his belt the hooked knife that had been a gift from the three Saba tribesmen whose camels he guarded. It was longer than an eating knife and shorter than a cavalry sword, finely wrought, sharp on both edges and slightly curved along its length. He kissed the flat iron for luck and hissed again, ‘Sebastos?’

‘Here!’

Another fissure stood parallel to his own, a dozen dangerous paces further along the gully. To reach it, Mergus climbed to the bluff’s flat top, sprinted forward and dropped down to where Pantera crouched in the sand behind the fallen body of his horse. Three arrows marked its throat and chest.

Pantera was the son of an archer; he could shoot with his eyes shut, and kill. To cover Mergus’ arrival, he stood up, fired and crouched again. From a distance, he could have been one of the robed Saba tribesmen, dark of skin, hair and eyes. Then his questing, river-brown gaze turned on Mergus and he was no one but himself; a man broken and mended again, alive with the clarity of one who has been to the edge of death and not let it destroy him.

It was the quality of Pantera’s gaze that had first caught Mergus’ attention two years before in Rome, at a livestock market, where the spy was hauling water, to all outward appearances a farm hand of limited intelligence – until he had asked a question and in it lay the answer to the greater question that had driven Mergus’ life.

For two decades, Mergus had served his emperor, rising through the ranks of the legions. But the emperor was a distant, ever-changing name, to be honoured in the mornings along

with Jupiter and the legion's standards. What mattered, what Mergus had sought and never found, was a man whom he could follow without reservation, wholeheartedly, with honour and honesty and joy.

And then he had come to Rome where he served the emperor directly and there, on the eve of the fire, he had met Pantera and had known at that first question, and in the impact of its answer, that in this man he had found everything he sought.

From that moment on, he had followed him with honour and honesty and joy through the fire that nearly destroyed Rome and out again, and now into the desert, on the trail of the man who had lit it.

They had survived this far together; Mergus did not intend to lose Pantera to bandits in a desert for the sake of a handful of camels. 'We can't stay here,' he said.

'We need to cross the gully. There's a deeper fissure on the other side. Right and then left. Go!'

They sprinted up the gully, and across to a fissure where a dead man lay – one of their outriders. Pantera fired three arrows on the run, the last as he pressed himself in beside Mergus. Other men lay dead across the trail: one of the Saba brothers, two of the outriders and three strangers. Their desert robes flowered across the sand, bright with new blood.

A second camel was dead, the remainder were careering across the sand in panic. Nobody followed them. Nobody tried to round them up.

'They're not after the train,' Mergus said.

Thirty-two pregnant camels were worth ten times that many horses or half a thousand head of sheep. No sane man would kill them; certainly they would not be allowed to stampede into the hyena-ridden hinterlands.

Another camel died, bellowing. Mergus spat. 'They're man-hunting,' he said. 'They've come for someone. Us.' This was arrogance: the presumption that no one else in the train was worth the kind of silver that had bought this raid. He believed it to be true.

Pantera nodded, absently. His gaze was fixed on the hostile desert.

Mergus bit back the question that jammed his tongue; no point now in asking how anyone knew they were there, and not safe, either. The tribesmen who owned the camels said that the ghûls who stalked the desert could take unspoken thoughts and give them shape. Mergus made the sign against evil behind his back, to ward them off. He risked another look round the rock lip that guarded his head. An arrow chased him back.

‘How many of them are there?’ Pantera asked it as he might have asked for the price of new arrows, and not cared the number of the answer.

‘Nine different voices,’ Mergus said. ‘Two different fletchings on the arrows, but there could be more than two archers.’

‘That’s what I thought: a dozen to begin and now nine. Let’s suppose they know who they’re after. If I attract their fire, will you mourn my death loudly?’

A shadow crossed Mergus’ heart. ‘Very loudly,’ he said, and tried to smile.

Pantera’s grip on his shoulder was quickly gone and then the man himself was gone, firing his arrows, killing some, angering the rest and making of himself a target when he could have been hidden. Mergus pressed his shoulder into the shelf of hard rock and breathed air that stank now of blood and sweat and split guts and his own fear.

‘Aaaaaaah!’ A high cry, not like Pantera at all, unless the wound were mortal—

‘Are you hit?’

‘No.’ Blood ran a river down Pantera’s left arm where an arrow had run too close. He slumped against the rock. ‘Mourn for me,’ he said. ‘Loudly.’

‘He’s dead! Sebastos is dead!’

Mergus howled fit to draw back the dawn-hunting jackals. He drew his palm up Pantera’s arm and smeared the blood along his hooked Saba knife and then across his lips and one

cheek, as if he had cut the throat of a brother out of kindness, and, out of love, had kissed him.

He ran out into the gully, stabbing the air, as one mad with grief. The desert had become a charnel house. Three bodies lay where there had been one. Another horse lay dying, stiff-legged, choking on its own blood. But the death was all done by bowmen; no one had fought hand to hand yet. Mergus searched the line of the arrow-fall, saw a fissure not unlike the one he had just left and charged it, screaming.

They thought him mad, and so he was mad, and god-held, as some men are in battle, who can run into certain death and yet not die. Mergus sprinted towards the tip of an arrow that was sighted on his heart and the man holding it lost the will to loose, dropped his guard and turned and tried to scramble out of the back of a fissure. He died with Mergus' curved knife slicing past his ribs to the pumping muscles of his heart.

Out of such courage are losing battles turned to victory. Two of the Saba brothers still lived – Ibrahim and Ilias. Of the remaining ten – nine – living outriders, eight were able to fight and two of those were armed with bows. They came together in the gully, battle-mad and ready to die.

‘We will avenge your brother, and ours.’

Ibrahim's heavy hand fell on Mergus' shoulder where Pantera's had lately been. Mergus did not shake him off or point out that Pantera had never been his brother and was certainly not his lover, which is what they thought.

When they joined the camel train, Mergus and Pantera had been, to all outward appearance, strangers to each other. They had joined on different days, in different languages, with different past histories to tell. But enough of those histories had been in common for it to be natural that they formed a friendship on the course of the month's journey from the Saba homelands and they had done so, until the brothers had begun to call them bedfellows, not sure if it were true or not, and Mergus had laid bets with himself as to how long it would be

before Pantera found it useful to let the other men believe that line had been crossed.

It had not happened yet, and now he was supposed to be dead. Too late, Mergus regretted that he had not thought to ask Pantera what he planned to do in his new role as an undead ghûl.

‘Eight are left against us.’ Sanhef, the smallest, wiriest of the outriders slid back into the gully, having been sent out to spy. ‘They’re trying to decide whether to ride away or attack us in here. They have no bowmen left. Mergus killed the last.’

‘And we have two.’ Ibrahim’s smile split his beard.

*Let them go*, Mergus said, in the cool sanity of his mind. *Let them carry news of Pantera’s death to whoever paid them. This is what they came for.*

In the insanity he must play, bereaved of his brother, his maybe-but-not-yet lover, he whistled up his mare and mounted at the run and unslung his bow and joined Ibrahim and Ilias in their charge along the gully. As one of the two living bowmen, he took the left flank. The other took the right. The remaining six men held the centre, long blades thrust out, cleaving the air with bloodied iron. They were eight against eight, but their eight thirsted for vengeance and the enemy wanted only the silver they thought they had earned.

It was a rout: horses screamed ahead as Mergus and the men about him emerged from the valley. Three of the enemy died to arrows, none of them living long enough to answer questions. The rest escaped. They were chased awhile, but not for long; it mattered more to round up the camels.

Twenty-six camels were left alive out of thirty-two, which was a miracle. Mergus saw them tethered, saw men begin to butcher those that had died, setting the meat to hang over a smoking fire, and went back to find Pantera.

Who had gone.

There was no sign of a body in the fissure, but no sign either of a living man so that Mergus wondered whether there had been another wound besides the one he had seen, and if he should begin to search for a body.



His mourning was becoming real by the time Pantera returned at dusk. By then, the dead horses had been burned, graves had been dug for the men of the camel train, and the bodies of their enemies had been mutilated beyond recognition so they could never return as undead spirits.

‘You’re not dead!’ Mergus greeted the spy with a joy that was not exaggerated. And then, because he had lived all his life in war and battle and his eye saw some things first, ‘There’s blood on your hands.’

‘Not mine. A man I stopped. Is that bakheer? Can we really spare it?’ This last in the Saba tongue to the overjoyed brothers, doubly pleased now, at his embracing of their gift. *Bakheer*: a delicacy made from the small intestines of a cow camel calf, pickled in brine, wine vinegar and herbs to a secret recipe known only to the Saba women who made it.

Ibrahim and Ilias had brought it out of their stock to feast their dead brother and so the rest must eat with them and not vomit at the taste, which was one to endure, not to savour. At the sight of it, Pantera gave a smile so broad it lit the fire, for which Mergus, in retribution, gave him a double helping of the foul intestinal mess.

Later, when the feasting was done, and the correct words spoken in honour of the dead, and their spirits sent to the light, and not the darkness, that the ghûls and ifrit and other djinn might not harry them; when the living had bound their wounds against scorpions, which were said to suck blood in the night, and against the flies, which certainly would do so in daytime, Mergus sat with Pantera and asked the question that had stayed all evening unsaid.

‘Was it Saulos who sent them?’ He spoke into the flames and no one was near enough to hear. He did not ask if Pantera had downed one of the galloping men with a bowshot, nor if the shot man had hit the ground alive and had soon wished himself dead: these things were to be presumed.

Pantera finished the tail end of a poor bandage on his arm.

Flickering firelight cast his gaze more green than brown. His skin was darker than when Mergus had first met him in Rome, his hair a shade lighter, more like old straw than oak leaves; both were the product of a month under the vicious desert sun. The darkening of his skin showed the scars on his face more clearly, giving him an asymmetry that was a source of endless fascination.

The scars on the rest of his body remained hidden, which was as well, given the present company; it would have been hard to explain why he had the signifier of a legion wrought in burn marks across his torso, and the pit of a burned-out brand of Mithras on his chest.

His lame leg, where the tendons had torn, seemed not to ache so much tonight; the desert was good to him. All these things and more Mergus studied, even as Pantera spoke.

‘A man with a beard paid a gold aureus to have a dozen men attack the entire train,’ Pantera said. ‘They were to kill all if they could, but to be certain they had slain a man named for the Leopard, who might be calling himself Sebastos.’

‘Gold?’ Mergus took out his knife and his scouring cloth and began to smooth the blade. A man could risk his life as an out-rider for a camel train for a month and earn one silver denarius for his trouble. If he took twenty-five such journeys, and spent nothing at any point on the way, he could convert his silver to one gold aureus.

Pantera said, ‘Pay to be collected on completion. Given today’s thinning of their ranks, four men have just collected a quarter of a gold coin each.’

‘They might think it almost worth the risk.’ Mergus tilted his knife. His own reflection gazed back at him, bearded now, as he had never been when he fought for the legions. ‘Who betrayed us?’

‘Perhaps no one.’ Pantera found a piece of camel fat on the ground near his heel and threw it on to the fire. It blazed with blue light and sent hot, greasy smoke to the evening sky. ‘Saulos

knows that where he goes, we will follow. He's two months ahead of us; he's had plenty of time to set a watch on every possible route into the city.'

'But he knew you were coming now, in this train.' Mergus' gaze roamed the group that sat round the fire. 'Someone told him that.'

'Maybe.' Pantera pulled his cloak up round his shoulders. 'We can find that out when we get to Caesarea. If we get there. What matters now is that he believes I'm dead. If he doesn't, we'll be arrested as we ride through the city gates.'

'We could leave the train before morning.' Mergus looked around him. The land stretched clear for a month's ride in every direction except east, where the sea caught it, and Caesarea was the button that held it fast.

Pantera was shaking his head. 'We can't leave without advertising exactly who we are, and anyway Hypatia's ship will dock soon; we can't abandon her now.'

'Then you'll need a new name; the raiders knew your old one.'

'I thought 'Afeef' might do. It means chaste in the Arab tongue, which would fit, don't you think?'

It did fit, in all ways: since the night of the fire in Rome, when he had conceived a daughter by the woman Hannah, Mergus had not known Pantera to bed anyone, and that was not for want of watching.

He leaned forward and poked the flames and said, 'You can't tell the brothers we were attacked because of you. What reason will you give for wanting to change?'

'That, as they know, the ifrit will be stalking us now, and it's ill luck to keep a name when men think you dead. That a distant sorcerer could use the name to attack me; that a new one will keep me safe.'

'They love you,' Mergus said, sourly. 'You ate a double helping of their foul bakheer. They'll do whatever you ask.'

'They love their camels,' Pantera said, and pulled his robes around his shoulder and lay on his saddle pack to sleep. 'They'll

do what it takes to keep them safe. I'll need a new horse, too, before we ride on. Do you suppose they'll let me ride one of the ones we captured? The little bay colt has a nice look to him. Nero would have bought him as a chariot horse. We might send him to Rome, as a gift from a dead spy.'

Mergus drew breath to speak the enjoinders to keep listening spirits from taking those words and making them real, but Pantera was asleep already, his face lined even in repose, his lashes dark on his cheeks, his breathing even and slow, so Mergus offered his prayer instead to Mithras, whose brand they both bore, that they might see their venture through to the end, that Saulos might die without destroying Jerusalem in fulfilment of a prophecy, and that both he, Mergus, and Pantera might live long enough to see it happen.