

## Chapter One

Gripping a dead tree, I drifted on dark waters through the still night, straining to hear the least sound. But silence enfolded me like a thick, wet cloak.



*Why am I in the river? Was I the only girl thrown over?*

The river moved beneath me like a waking serpent. I tucked a strand of wet hair behind my ear and glanced around in the perilous darkness.

A sound like distant thunder grew into a low rumble.

*What is that noise?*

The log I'd climbed onto during the night turned in slow motion, drifting toward the muddy banks. I thought I would finally escape the freezing water, but then the river dropped and surged ahead, pulling me into the swift current. What I saw in the dim light of dawn terrified me.

"Rapids!" I cried.

Massive boulders rose like glistening black teeth. I lunged off the log, trying to get away, but the angry river seemed determined to swallow me.

A huge rock loomed ahead. I screamed, grabbing for anything to save me. I twisted away, but my head smashed into the stone, sending flashes of pain through my skull.

When I opened my eyes, I was pinned against the rock by another log. A slimy green growth covered the rotting bark, and two jagged limbs stuck out like broken arm bones. As I strained to push it away, a sharp pain shot from my head into my shoulders.

The roaring current caught my legs, pulling me into the rapids. I grabbed for the log but missed.

I crashed into the boulders and plunged through foaming whitewater until I tumbled into a deep pool.

When I surfaced, gasping for breath, the slimy log popped up beside me. I grabbed it, letting the eddy carry me around in a slow circle.

Every movement caused excruciating pain from the back of my head across to my temples. As I held on with one hand and lay back in the water, clouds and overhanging trees revolved in the morning sunshine.

Birds chirped in the palm trees, and a gentle breeze brought the earthy scent of dry land and flowering plants. *Why am I in the river?* My head hurt when I tried to concentrate. All I remembered was two men throwing me from a bridge. *What happened to the others?*

Exhausted from fighting the river, I was drained of energy. The will to continue—that was gone, too. So, I took a shallow breath and let go. As I sank into the cold depths, relief came over me as the spiraling world blurred into darkness.



Suddenly, something moving through the water startled me. A creature grabbed me around the waist. I struggled and pushed against it, thinking a water snake held onto me. The serpent yanked me above the surface. I tried to scream but only coughed and choked on the water I'd swallowed.

The snake tightened its hold, trying to crush me. I pushed against the writhing body, but it was too strong. It lifted me until I stared into a large eye surrounded by wrinkled gray skin. Frightened by this dreadful image, I could do nothing but tremble within the creature's grasp.

The beast blinked and shifted its grip on my wet belly, holding me farther away. Two long horns extended from its mouth and curved along both sides of me.

I pushed with all my strength. "Let go!"

My shrieking voice startled a flock of swallows from the palm trees. Their wings beat the air in a muffled uproar of flight.

The racket must have frightened the animal, because it released me and bellowed so loud, it rattled my insides. The instant it let go, I grabbed hold of what wasn't a snake, but a long, curling trunk. I wrapped my arms around it, holding tight. I didn't want the monster to eat me, but I didn't want to fall onto one of those horns either.

I screamed while the beast trumpeted, splashing and crashing its way onto the riverbank, trying to shake me loose. I held on tight when it jerked its trunk high in the air, howling as if something had bitten it.

Perhaps, in my desperation, I did bite its trunk, but it couldn't have caused enough pain

to justify such a rampage. The creature stumbled across the sand, crashing through the brush until it rammed its backside into an enormous carob tree. The tree shuddered all the way to the topmost branches, shaking so hard, a large dead section broke loose and fell, smashing onto the creature's head.

It swayed. Its eyes fluttered closed, then it toppled over, crashing to the ground in a cloud of dust, leaves, and branches. The animal's head hit a boulder, and its coiled trunk, with me attached, came to rest on the upper side of its massive face.

I sat up, trying to catch my breath while brushing wet hair from my eyes. I glanced over the still figure of the gray beast.

“Did I kill him?”

Laughter came from behind me, and I turned to see six soldiers. They wore thick leather breastplates with carved battle scenes, along with decorated metal guards protecting their wrists and shins.

“Did you ever see such a sight?”

A red-bearded man pointed a gnarled finger at me. He wore a shiny helmet, with long animal hair sticking straight up from the top and running in a row down the back. Each man carried a spear and had a sword in his belt.

Another soldier tossed his shield to the sand, laughing so hard, he could barely speak. “Obolus, the mighty war elephant, laid out by a child!” He clapped a hand on his comrade's shoulder. “And a worthless half-girl at that. I doubt she's even twelve summers in age.”

Wide leather strips with silver trim hung from the soldiers' belts to form protective skirts over short tunics.

“The brave Obolus,” the first man said, “so courageous in battle that he tramples a hundred men in a row, but a terrible girl grabs his trunk, and straightaway he dies of fright.” This brought on more laughter.

I wanted to run away, but they surrounded me.



“Tonight we feast!” shouted a burly man with oily black hair. He placed his helmet on the tip of his spear and waved it in the air. “On roasted leg of beast and elephant-ear stew.”

“Oh, yes. Two very large ears,” said the red-bearded man.

He drew his dagger and made a cutting motion through the air. The few teeth he had left

were sallow and crooked, with one broken off, leaving a jagged stump. Beady eyes and a lopsided nose made him appear cross-eyed.

He came toward me, motioning for the others to follow. A chill scratched along my spine like an icy fingernail.

*What are they going to do to me?*

I wore only a small loincloth, still wet from the river.

*Where am I?*

When I tried to concentrate, my head ached all the way to its core. As I looked about for some way to escape, the men tightened their circle around me.

“This could be a serious matter indeed.” Red Beard looked at his friends, apparently waiting to be sure he had their attention. “We must hope and pray that our next battle doesn’t take us up against a legion of half-naked girls.” The men laughed. “For then, our war elephants would surely trample us all to death in their stampede to escape such a horrible engagement.”

Just when he flipped his knife into a stabbing grip, a tall man with a staff strode through the ring of men. The color of his robe was an unusual red-violet, and his turban was adorned with a golden emblem on the front. A jeweled dagger swung from a woven leather belt around his waist. He was much older than the soldiers, but his posture was straight and rigid.

The soldiers grew silent as he walked before them. They backed away, intently watching the tall man. Red Beard slipped his knife into its sheath.

The old man shook his head and looked from the beast to me. “An evil omen,” he muttered. “That is certain. Many shall perish in sacrifice because of this sign from the goddess Tanit.”

The men whispered to each other, and I could see by their attention his words carried great weight.

I slipped off the animal and stepped away to study his enormous body. Even lying on his side, he towered above my head.

*An “elephant”...is that what they called it?*

A hand touched my shoulder, and I jumped away. When I turned, a young man I hadn’t seen before held out his cloak to me. He wasn’t a soldier, so I thought he must have arrived with the turbaned man. I took the cape and wrapped it around myself, shivering in fear of the soldiers and from the cold river.

The cloak brought warmth, but I felt a hundred different pains from all the cuts and bruises. My back, head...everything hurt, and exhaustion weakened my legs.

The man in the turban lifted his face to the sky and began a mournful chant. The soldiers prayed, leaning their spears in the crooks of their arms and clasping their hands before themselves. While the others mumbled toward the sky, the red-bearded soldier lowered his head to stare at me. A hungry animal couldn’t have frightened me more.

“Go now,” the young man whispered.

I stepped back, tangling my feet and almost tripping myself. “Where?” I asked.

Unlike the soldiers, who were bushy-faced and boisterous, he was clean-shaven and soft-spoken. His brown eyes—the color of almonds and honey—were easy to look upon. He didn’t carry a weapon or wear armor, but he did have a sash around the waist of his white tunic. The sash was made of the same unusual cloth as the tall man’s robe.

He placed his hand on my back, guiding me away from the soldiers, over near the edge of the forest. “Hurry along that path to the camp and ask for the woman called Yzabel. She will find something for you to eat. Go quickly before Hannibal comes here and sees one of his elephants laid out on the ground.”

Painful thought it was, I ran along the path leading into the woods. I was grateful for the comfort of his cape and knew I should have thanked him. The thick cloak was dappled in leafy green and shades of tan. It extended almost to the ground, covering me from shoulders to ankles.

I stopped and looked back, but the young man was gone.

The large lump on the back of my head hurt more than ever. When I touched it, pain shot across my forehead and into my eyes, making me dizzy.

*If only I could lie down and sleep for a little while.*

A patch of grass, like a soft green bed, lay beneath a nearby oak tree. When I took a step toward the grass, I heard noises in the distance. A dog barked and the clang of metal echoed through the forest.

*The camp must be nearby.*

I walked toward the sounds, too exhausted to run any more.



Near the path, a boy gathered wood. He wore a gray tunic and had his shaggy hair tied back with a leather string. He gave me a contemptuous sneer and I wondered why. One of the sticks fell from his arm. He snatched it from the ground and cocked it back over his shoulder, as if to throw it at me. I kept my eyes on him and picked up a jagged stone the size of my fist, raising it in defiance. After surviving the river, the elephant with his long horns, and the frightening soldiers, I wasn't going to be intimidated by a boy. He was taller than me, but I had the rock.

He swung his stick, hitting a nearby tree, then turned away, carrying his load of wood along the path. After he was out of sight, I continued the same way he had gone, keeping my rock handy.

Near the end of the trail, a slight breeze brought the delicious scent of food, making my empty stomach cramp with hunger pangs.

The path came out of the pine forest, wound beside a large gray tent, and down a gentle slope into the main camp. Many tents and wooden huts dotted a series of low hills, spreading across the landscape like a small city.

I followed the aroma of cooking food to the gray tent where a woman stood beside a fire

in the morning sunshine. She sliced vegetables into a simmering pot. Several tables with wooden benches circled the hearth.

She reached for a turnip and glanced my way. Her honey-almond eyes narrowed on me.

“Where did you get that cape?”

I looked down, shuffling my feet in the dirt. I didn’t know what to say.

The woman came toward me, with the knife in her hand. I stepped back.

“That’s Tendao’s cape. Where did you get it?”

I pulled the cloak tighter around myself, then remembered the young man. He’d told me to ask for a woman who would give me something to eat.

“Do you know of Yzebel?”

“I’m Yzebel. Why do you wear Tendao’s cape and ask for me?”

She came closer and grabbed the cloak. I looked at the knife in the woman’s hand, then back at her face. Knots bulged in her clenched jaw, and her brow furrowed, distorting her beautiful face.

I held the cape closed, but Yzebel was too strong for me. She yanked it open. The sudden change I saw in her astonished me. Her stern features transformed so completely, it seemed another person had taken her place. The irritation and anger quickly softened into compassion and tenderness.

“Great Mother Elissa!” Yzebel stared at my bruised body. “What happened to you?”