

TWO FRENCH AGENTS • 1

BEFORE SUNRISE, THE UNDULATING call to prayer from the minaret of the El-Mursi Abul Abbas Mosque reverberated through the Anfoushi neighborhood of Alexandria, the principal port of Egypt. Elisha Ringel had become accustomed to the sound during his travels in Muslim lands, and as always, he immediately got up and prayed. If Muslims were streaming to the mosque to pray, he could not remain in his bed.

The donkey cart he had hired to transport him to the docks was waiting outside the inn. Elisha tipped the lad who placed his bags in the cart and climbed up to sit beside the driver. They made their way out of the warren of narrow streets onto the broad avenue lined with palm trees alongside the Mediterranean coast. White seagulls flew overhead, cawing as they scavenged for food. Although it was still early, the air was already so humid that Elisha's shirt clung to his skin, but a light, salt-laden sea breeze brought some welcome relief.

With slow, plodding steps, the donkey pulled the cart past the massive coastal fortifications of the two-hundred-year-old Qaitbay Citadel, and shortly thereafter, they arrived at the harbor of Alexandria Bay at the headwaters of the Nile River. Ships flying the flags of numerous countries were moored at the docks or lay at anchor in the open waters of the bay.

Elisha told the driver to stop near a small Dutch flute. He got down, paid the driver and took his bags.

A stocky man with a face bronzed by years spent in the sun on the deck of a ship greeted Elisha with a gap-toothed smile.

“Good day, Herr Ringel,” he said in guttural German. “You’re early. Welcome aboard the *Zeelander*.” Behind him, a dozen sailors were readying the ship for a sea voyage.

“Good day, Captain van Leeuwenhoek,” said Elisha. He walked up the gangplank and shook hands with the captain. “Better early than late, I always say. How are you enjoying this fine weather?”

“I love it. I wish they had such weather in Rotterdam. We Dutch are a nation, but our weather can’t compare to this.”

“Well, it’s a little hot for me, but I’m not complaining. It will be beautiful spring when I get back to Poland, but the winters in Warsaw can be quite brutal. Has my cargo arrived in good condition and on time?”

“It has, and it has. The cotton fabrics and the spices are stowed safely in a good spot in the hold where they’ll be dry and protected.”

“It’s a pleasure doing business with you, captain. You’ve never given me less than the best service.”

“I wish all my customers were as honest and reliable as you are. I consider us friends, Herr Ringel. I’d be most pleased if you called me Martin. My name is actually Mauritius, as you know, but my friends call me Martin.”

“That’s truly kind of you, but I prefer Captain. It makes me feel as if I’m on an adventure. Few of my friends and associates in Warsaw have ever encountered a seagoing captain.”

“Been away from home for a long time?”

Elisha nodded. “I miss my family.”

“You will be with them shortly. We’ll be in Trieste in the north of Italy in two to three weeks, weather permitting, after

a brief stopover in Venice. And from there, you can head directly to Warsaw.”

“Not quite,” said Elisha. “I’ll be sending the cargo directly from Trieste to my warehouse in Warsaw, but I’m going first to Vienna. The son of a good friend is to be wed.”

The captain shrugged. “Well, Vienna is on the way to Warsaw. Shouldn’t add more than a few days to your journey.”

“I hope. But who knows what the future holds in store?”

“Isn’t that the truth?”

“How many passengers are you carrying, captain?”

“Six in total,” said the captain. He looked up and saw two men in the distance. “Those two who are approaching. And three others. We set sail as soon as everyone boards.”

The two men arrived at the dock and came aboard. They shook hands with the captain and nodded to Elisha. Both wore simple frock coats and black tricorne hats. The older of the two was tall and slender with a trimmed gray beard. The younger was short, broad-shouldered, barrel-chested and clean-shaven.

“You gentlemen will be in each other’s company for several weeks,” said the captain. “Let me make the introductions. This is Herr Elisha Ringel of Warsaw. And these gentlemen are Monsieur Jacques Trudeau and Monsieur Alain Cartier. They’re from Marseilles.”

The men smiled graciously and shook hands with Elisha.

“Did your endeavors meet with success in Alexandria, if I may ask?” said Trudeau in polished German with a distinct French accent.

“I’m a spice merchant,” Elisha replied. “I purchased a load of spices and fine Egyptian cotton textiles. The Almighty was good to me. I’m pleased that my time was well spent. And were you gentlemen successful as well?”

“Quite successful,” said Trudeau. “I’m a purchasing agent

for a merchant in Venice. Monsieur Cartier is my assistant. I'm quite satisfied with our purchases." He turned to the captain. "Do you think we'll sail within the hour?"

"I expect so. As soon as the others are on board."

An hour later, a message from the absent passengers was delivered. They had been delayed, and it would be no less than three to four hours until they made an appearance.

"It looks like we won't set sail until this afternoon," said the captain. "You can leave your bags on board and go ashore for a while."

"Perhaps we'll venture into the *souk*," said Trudeau. "The noon hour is approaching, and I have need of something to eat. Afterward we'll seek small gifts for our families."

"Good idea," said the captain. "Don't dawdle, however, I wish to set sail as soon as the others arrive."

"Certainly. The *souk* is not too far. We shall return in an hour or two. Herr Ringel, would you care to join us?"

"Indeed, I would. It is most kind of you to include me."

The two Frenchmen stowed their luggage in their sleeping quarters, and when they returned, Trudeau had a small bag slung over his right shoulder. Elisha wondered what was in it. Perhaps it contained money or jewels. His own valuables were securely hidden in a money belt worn beneath his shirt.

The three men chatted amiably as they strolled through the winding streets. Elisha found Trudeau to be intelligent and insightful, while Cartier had little to contribute to the conversation. But even as they conversed, he had the uneasy feeling that danger was stalking them. He stole a surreptitious look over his shoulder. He noticed nothing suspicious, but the feeling persisted. It wasn't something he consciously heard or saw, just a sixth sense, a subliminal awareness of tiny anomalies in his surroundings. It was an instinct he had developed over the years, and it had saved him on more than one occasion.

But why would anyone be following him? And if he were not the one being followed, why would they be following two innocuous French purchasing agents? Perhaps he was wrong, thought Elisha. Perhaps it was just his imagination. But he didn't believe he was mistaken. The feeling was real. They were being followed.

Soon, they entered the *souk*. Stalls, shops and peddlers with pushcarts offered merchandise of every sort — fabrics, carpets, clothing, sandals, inexpensive jewelry, trinkets, produce, meats and even live goats and chickens. The marketplace was a riot of colors, smells and sounds, teeming with Arabs, Turks, Africans, Indians and Europeans in all shapes and sizes jabbering in a cacophony of languages.

For the next hour, Elisha's two French companions browsed through the marketplace, completely oblivious to any sense of danger, but Elisha had lost all interest in the wares being offered for sale. He was on edge. The sense of being watched persisted. It was as if hostile eyes were boring into his back. Was an attack imminent? But why would he be targeted for a deliberate attack? He was dressed in plain garments and didn't give the appearance of being particularly prosperous. Why would anyone want to follow and attack his companions? They were similarly unassuming. Elisha scanned the vicinity for someone acting in a suspicious manner, but he could not detect anything.

Presently, the Frenchmen slung the sacks containing their purchases onto their shoulders, and the three men headed to the ship.

"But why didn't you buy anything, Herr Ringel?" said Trudeau. "There were numerous opportunities to purchase beautiful gifts for your family! So inexpensive!"

Elisha shrugged. "Nothing caught my fancy. I bought gifts for my family yesterday. They're in my bags." He made no mention of his feelings of apprehension. "I have to make

a brief detour. Please go on to the ship and tell the captain I'll be along shortly."

He turned into the secluded doorway of a shop selling carpets and waited until the Frenchmen blended into the crowd ahead. Then he stepped back into the street and concealed himself behind a massive heap of cotton bales. He did not have long to wait.

Barely one minute later, a tall, muscular man headed down the street. He kept to the sides in order to remain inconspicuous, but his vaguely stealthy demeanor instantly caught Elisha's attention. He was dressed as an Arab in an olive green *djellaba* that hung over his body like a loose tent, but as he drew near, the intense heat of the day compelled him to throw off the hood that covered his face. The man had pale, almost colorless eyes, blond hair and a red face bathed in perspiration. It was obvious that he was a German, and he looked menacing.

The man passed so close to Elisha that he could have reached out and touched him. He reeked of stale beer and sausages. There was something vicious and malevolent about him, an air of evil that sent shivers down Elisha's spine. He knew his kind well; he'd seen enough of them roaming every port in Africa. German mercenaries in the employ of the master with the most gold.

As soon as the German passed, Elisha ran down an alleyway to the parallel street and followed it back to the ship. He arrived before the Frenchmen, and from the deck, he watched them arrive at the dock and make their way on board. He saw the tall German halt in the shadows of a building across the avenue. He stood there for a long time, staring at the ship as if to memorize its every detail. Then he turned and walked away.