

PART SEVEN

While it was true that Pothinus was not present at the king's table that evening, it was apparent not all took relish in that fact the way Caesar and Cleopatra did. Little Ptolemy was in a fit of tears.

"You had no right!" he was sobbing, banging his chubby fist on the mahogany table. "N-no right at all to go k-k-killing," he stammered out between bursts of tears. "Whoever you want in *my* palace."

"It is *my* palace," Cleopatra sneered at him.

But this Caesar disagreed with, taking a tray of soft-boiled peacock eggs and presenting them to the lad. "Actually, for the moment, it is mine. *Majesty*," Caesar cooed, offering him the plate of delicacies. "Surely he would not wish you to carry on this way." Ptolemy took an egg glumly, looking up at his occupier with round, wet grey eyes. "Courage!" he extolled. "Courage in the face of hardships! You are a man now, it is time to gird your loins and put aside such expressions of emotion. Those belong in the nursery." It was no credit to Egypt that Rome knew how to manipulate her king so expertly, for Ptolemy nodded, sucking at the rich yellow yolk in a manner reminiscent of a babe sucking at its pacifier. "We have experienced many tragic losses in the last few days, it is true. But it is because of those sacrifices that Your Eminence may once again indulge in these fine delicacies. So much better than gruel, eh?" Apparently, in the weighing of Pothinus versus eating anything but oat mash, Ptolemy's stomach won out, for he cried no more, though continued to pout steadily through the meal.

Publius Rufrius appeared late to the dinner, clutching to his chest a crumpled and clearly treasured message to the Emperor. "Caesar," he hissed, bending to his ear as his leader sat. The rest was whispered so quietly as to be indiscernible for Cleopatra, not that she did not try: her green eyes were very narrow as she tried to guess at what made her Roman guest's brow furrow so – followed by a lightness in the eyes, like relief. For his part, Ptolemy was completely ignorant, busily helping himself to stalks of asparagus as delicate and thin as blades of grass.

"Very well," Caesar replied to whatever it was Rufrius had been saying to him, and he rose, palms flat on the table. "Your majesties will please excuse Caesar." And just like that, he had left! Only Amicus remained as her friend in the hall, and the queen began to notice a nervous feeling in her belly that she did not like. She cast her eyes to her younger brother – little Ptolemy was ignorant of anything other than stuffing his face. Whence, then, did this uncomfortable feeling spring from?

Cleopatra was made aware all too soon, for who should slink into the dining hall but Theodotus. The Grecian tutor swayed from foot to foot, clad in a black robe and his bald head uncovered as he sang the songs of woe. It may very well have been, she noted, the first time one viper slithered through her palace without its compatriot. No wonder such a scene.

"Oh, Majesty!" he groaned, holding at his stomach as though grief were tearing him in two (she doubted this, and thought if anything were painning him, it was conscience or nerves). "What a black day this is for Egypt!"

Ptolemy was clearly quite startled to be interrupted at his table in such a manner by his tutor, and grease from the bit of rabbit he held between his fingers dripped down his arm. "Theodotus?" he asked, setting his meat down in consternation and confusion. "What is it?"

"Your loyal servant Pothinus!" he protested, falling to his knees and weeping (how sincerely the queen doubted) at his sovereign's feet. "Cruelly *murdered* by those Roman dogs...."

"Oh..." Ptolemy replied a little morosely. His spirits could not be dampened too much, however; from her rigid position in her chair, Cleopatra watched him place the piece of rabbit back into his cheeks and chew with great satisfaction. "Yes. It is a sad thing."

"Sire..." Theodotus protested lightly. "He was your Lord High Chamberlain, the one appointed

as your protector in your father's passing. What Rome has done is a breach of its stated goals – upholding your father's law.”

“Is it?” the boy asked, sitting up a little and interested.

“You had better stop, Theodotus,” Cleopatra warned, not eating as servants tried to tempt her with delicacies long denied. In his corner, Amicus waited quietly. How long had this been planned?

“Of course....” the tutor seemed to hiss it, like a snake. “How can they kill a member of the court without trying him by *our* laws. He was not *Rome's* to do with as they liked. They have gone over your most sacred head, they have *denied* your will as king.”

“*Stop.*”

“If they can treat the Lord Chamberlain like a slave – what prevents them from *manhandling* our most divine king?” He could see that Ptolemy was listening, for he had stopped eating. Cleopatra did not move, observing them both as her stomach twisted and turned all the harder. “This is no time to trust Roman justice, my Lord....clearly it is unjust.”

“Y-yes....but what *can* we do?”

“I have spent all morning thinking of this, since Pothinus was *dragged* out by those Roman *barbarians*. There is but one possibility. Go to your people, my king. Tell them of this gross injustice perpetrated by Rome. Let Egypt throw Rome out.”

Amicus was standing behind Cleopatra's chair, she could feel his hard and agitated breath hitting the crown of her hair. Pharaoh clutched at the satin wrap around her shoulders. “Caesar would not like this, Theodotus.”

“Not all of us are Rome's whores, like you!” Ptolemy spoke up, spouting all that Theodotus – and yes, Pothinus – had taught him to before Caesar came a-meddling. The tutor's plan had, apparently, worked. The boy stood, falsely inflated with a sense of his kingship. “Let us go, Theodotus! I will speak to my people!”

The two loyal to Caesar watched the scheming pair leave with great distaste, but did nothing for a moment to allow the effrontery of what had just taken place sink in. “...you let them go?” Cleopatra charged her guardian, voice a little shaky. Would a mob assemble to hear Ptolemy? Isis, let it not be so. A whipped up rabble had taken crowns off of heads – and heads off of shoulders – many a time in her family history. In the eye of her memory, she saw clearly the crowds roiling around the palace as her father held her in his large lap; another mob in another time, the one that had driven them to seek Rome's aid in the first place. But Rome was here now. What would the outcome be?

“The only guards in shouting distance are your Egyptian ones. I have no way of knowing if I would be speared for attempting to seize the king. Besides, I am ordered not to leave your side but in the company of Caesar or your quarters – especially after you sneaked away like that this morning....”

“Then what *are* we to do?”

The Roman offered the queen his dry and burly hand. “I must alert Rufrius. I have a terrible feeling about all of this.”

The witnesses were too nervous to walk the halls. What started as a brisk trot picked up its pace as a low hum began to reverberate throughout the palace; the noise of a crowd – so easily stirred up – surrounding the compound. How had Theodotus done it without Pothinus or Achilles to help? Money? Threats? Or was this Pothinus' orchestration, had he arranged this all before his death as a last stab at her from beyond the grave? It was too horrible to think.

Amicus arriving breathless with the queen, her hair tousled and tangled from the jolt, was enough to scare his companion lictors into asking no questions. Rather, they immediately opened the doors to surprised Rufrius and ever-planning Caesar. “Great gods, what is the matter!” the former exclaimed at the unnerving sight.

“Theodotus...and Ptolemy...” Cleopatra gasped.

“He's forming a mob outside the palace gates, and intends for Ptolemy to speak of Pothinus' death.”

“Can he form a mob that fast?” Rufrius gaped in incredulity.

“Oh yes,” Cleopatra was at last catching her breath. “There was one surrounding the palace the morning after I arrived, remember? It was disbanded in time, but there is nothing Alexandrians love more than mob democracy.”

The throbbing hum had started off resembling a nest of bees, but it grew now to a tremendous, rhythmic pounding. The smooth walls of the palace nearly seemed to shake with it. And throughout this great shrieking and shouting could be heard – quite distinguishably – calls such as “Death to the slut Cleopatra!” “The barbarian Caesar's head and shit to Rome!” The girl closed her eyes and tried to control the trembling of her hands.

Caesar was certainly in control of his own hands – for one fist was brought down *hard* upon the ornate ebony table. So hard, a spidery crack began through its polished surface, and all winced in surprise at this rare show of temper. “*Gods damn it all*, Rufrius, you are supposed to keep these idiotic disasters from happening!”

“I-I...” he stammered. Caesar's anger would be apologized for later, especially considering there was little they could have done to prevent this setback. For the moment, however, it was terrifying.

“Amicus, don't just stand there stupidly, *go and get that boy away from the crowd!* I don't care if you drag him kicking and screaming! And bring me Theodotus!” Both he and Rufrius saluted and took off at a run to accomplish these orders. Unable to do a thing, Cleopatra stood there and watched as this mighty Roman betrayed his mortality and gave in to an absolute fit of rage. Papers were thrown, a chair knocked over; she might have moved to a corner, but she did not wish to draw any attention to herself in this maelstrom of discontent. Her jade eyes would be squeezed shut for a moment when some object would narrowly avoid hitting her directly, but otherwise she showed no signs of any fear she might – and certainly must – be feeling. Caesar seemed to calm at last, for he leaned over the table panting and pulling at his sparse hair, still gripping at the cracked surface. “I'll have him flogged,” the general was growling – not to her, but unspecified. The white dog sat at his heels with his ears pulled back, clearly picking up the upset emotions within the room. “No, *exiled.*” Cleopatra gathered he meant Theodotus, and cautiously inched her way closer to the Roman, green eyes mixed with nervousness and curiosity. “And if he doesn't like that idea, I can think of a *thousand* far more satisfying means to ends.”

“Mighty Caesar-” She should not have interrupted his train of thought, for with reflexes that belied his age, he had turned and grabbed her by the smooth throat. The queen gasped to be handled thus – she was naturally frightened. But she labored *hard* to keep her breathing under control, to not appear scared with the Emperor. No better time than now to display her trust, and she whispered, “I am not your enemy, Caesar. I am the one who places all of her trust in you.”

“You shouldn't leave yourself alone with a Roman barbarian,” he growled very low, those blue eyes more steely than she had ever seen them. Had such a comment truly riled him? He must have heard it a million times before. Or had Caesar, who so *constantly* showed no emotion under the strain in Alexandria, finally reached his breaking point? He ran his rough thumb along her trachea, and she just managed to keep her eyes from closing in her fright. “How easily I could crush this neck and take all the riches of Egypt for myself.”

The young girl swallowed hard and gathered her composure. “Such as what?”

“Such as *what?*” he hissed, his hand briefly tightening. “I would think that should be obvious; her grain, her gold, her spices and silks. I could do it very easily.”

“I know you could.”

“You flatter and attend me, but what makes you think I trust you *one kernel* more than your brother? What reason do I have? The Ptolemys have *never* been a friend of Rome.”

“I am,” she told him, gently clasping her hand over his thick wrist. His hard eyes glanced at the hand and back at her. “A-and...*I* am one of Egypt's riches, am I not? In alliances for all those silks and gold...and other things.”

“*You're trying to change the subject.*” He squeezed ever so slightly and she could not repress the

quicker beating of her heart, the way her flat bosom rose and fell more rapidly in its shallow breaths. "I'm not a fool, it won't work. Perhaps I have had enough of all this scheming, perhaps I shall agree with Rufrius and dispatch with you and your brothers and put some client king upon the throne. I could do it in a moment, if it pleased me. It *might* please me. Certainly it would win me favor in the Senate, and I could use that right now. Are you not afraid of mighty Caesar?" he hissed, continuing to watch her like a predator. Did Rufrius advocate such a plan of action? If so, what stopped Caesar from implementing it? Could it be he liked her more than he was currently letting on, or did he have some other clever motive?

With his hand still around her throat, Cleopatra did something she had, in her twenty one years, done virtually with him alone; she slowly went down onto her knees. This she did before her father and her gods – never a mortal man, certainly not one that was *touching* her like this. She could feel her blood rushing and wondered if he could as well. "...yes, I am," she admitted, lips parted as she panted through her fear. "But I meant what I said about placing my trust in you." His hand loosened, he must be listening. "Caesar is my *only* refuge. You do not wish me to cower and grovel, you are too great for such pettiness – but I would go on my knees before you, because Caesar is magnanimous and good. He is known for his mercy – we talked of it, remember?"

They remained like that in such a tense position for not a few moments; Caesar's rough and weathered hand grasping that delicate throat. So easy to break, and yet as the minutes ticked by, an increased gentleness seemed to overcome this blustering Roman. He held her neck more as a small and treasured animal, even stroked the soft olive skin with the tip of his thumb. Candidus whined, and it seemed to bring the Emperor back to himself, and he released the girl. "...you are right," he whispered, extending that hand now to help her up. "I would not have you such." Cleopatra accepted his hand and rose to her feet, and they simply looked at each other in silence for some time. She tried not to tremble as the adrenaline finished flooding her system. "You told me once," he said at last, voice firm and steady as normal, and she gave a great sigh of relief that the moment appeared to have passed. "That any secret little...*tunnels* to my room are long since blocked off. How do you know that?"

"B-because..." the Pharaoh blushed, eyes averted. "These are – were – my rooms. I sealed them myself."

He seemed a little surprised and sat, scratching at the ears of his dog to calm himself. "...why didn't you tell me that."

"To what purpose? They are the finest rooms in the palace, and Caesar should have – and doubtless would have taken – the very best."

"I could have arranged to move. It might have looked good, showing I wasn't trampling all over Egypt's royalty."

"No, that isn't it." She shook her head and hands before sitting, taking his calm as a sign to relax and be amiable. "Maybe you are correct, I don't know, but any sign of weakness and Pothinus would have gained a foothold. I think it was better this way."

"He gains a foothold now," the Roman sneered, still clearly irritated. "From the bank of the Styx to torment us."

"Caesar has faced mightier enemies."

"Caesar is *tired*." He looked straight at her, and Cleopatra felt – for the very first time – that she saw a piece of the real man. How dazzled she felt by it; far grander than any god, for he conquered so much with *human* frailties to deal with. And for this brief moment, this flawed and fantastic man bore his soul to *her*; this child in comparison. Overwhelmed as she was, she also was made aware of how foolishly she'd been deceived. This genteel, easy going facade he showed to her, how it hid the hardened warrior underneath, just now terrifyingly displayed. Was it any wonder, then, that so many thought they might best him, only to taste his sword? "A civil war, *ten years* in Gaul, a consul before that. My daughter *dead*, my wife *dead*, my aunt, my mother, my father – what do I have left but this endless tide of blood?"

“There must be a purpose to it all!” she responded with an impassioned cry, grasping the hand that had so recently held her life. “The gods would not be so cruel.”

“The gods could and have done much, much worse.”

“But they favor you, there is a purpose for you. A *dream* to make a man do what you do. It's more than power, more than wealth. That isn't enough to drive a man across a continent – to make him fight such a stupid war as this, for a girl he hardly knows.”

“I never said it was for you.”

“Maybe not. But I am part of the end result. Egypt's wealth is my wealth – and I would give it to you. For you are such a man, the god's own chosen one.”

Caesar was quite clearly surprised; he looked at her hand and back at her in silence before at last responding. “...how little you know of the world. Men do worse for baser reasons.”

“Not you, you are greater than all that. Or you wouldn't have forgiven the senators that stood against you at Pharsalus; you wouldn't try to avenge your adversary's murder. You wouldn't be *here*, Caesar.”

There was a long, heavy pause. Caesar scratched at his head briefly with his free hand, gave a weighted sigh. “There was a dream once, I'm sure. A world greater than we had known before. But the wars go on and the sacrifice becomes too great. What is such a dream worth?”

“We can make the world like that,” she entreated, still holding that weathered hand. “Egypt and Rome. Together.”

“Together....”

“Allies, not enemies. Let it be so, Caesar.”

There was a knock at the door. A sweating and ruffled Amicus stuck his head in, face red. “I-Imperator,” he hesitated, briefly noticing the hands of both.

“What is it.”

“The boy, Ptolemy...er, the *king*, General. It took a little effort, but we wrested him out of the palace square. He was *scrappy* for such a tubby creature.” He showed a quickly spreading welt at his arm. “He kicks!”

Caesar was unconcerned. “And Theodotus?”

“Arrested. It took the legionaries, but we moved the mob off. But they weren't happy about it.”

“Of course they weren't. Did Rufrius say anything?”

“He tried, but he does not have your way, General. It's hard to counter a speech about Romans taking riches and grains and the throne of Egypt-”

“Enough.” Caesar waved his hand and then pinched the bridge of his nose. “Enough....Tell Rufrius to come and see me, we must talk.” As a second thought, he noticed the glances of Amicus at the comparatively intimate pose of the two, and offered up the hand of the queen. “Return the Pharaoh to her quarters. Guard them well, Amicus.”

A snap of boots and a quick salute. “Hail Caesar!”

Cleopatra rose, shaking out her still tousled hair slightly. “....thank you for your confidence.”

Imperator did not respond – in fact, was not even looking at her. His sight was fixed firmly out the window. Looking for the dispersing crowd, or just lost in thought? “Good night, Queen Cleopatra.”

She could expect no more warmth than that, then, after bearing her own soul to him. With a shake of the head and a slight sigh, the girl took her leave, walking closely by the side of the somewhat smelly, sweaty Amicus. “It was all handled very well,” he attempted to assure her, hating to think what Charmian would say to him if she thought him the cause of her mistress' unhappiness. “A little...*violent*. I'm sure you understand that. But the damage was *controlled*.”

“I have no doubt it was, Amicus....” she whispered, becoming lost in thought herself. “I have no doubt at all....” Her melancholy stemmed from quite a different source this evening, in a way it never had before.

Despite how drained she felt with the constant concerns of war and famine, she could not sleep

that long night. Worried Charmian rubbed scented oils into her feet and hands and brought a slave to play the lyre in a very soothing manner, but nothing helped. The queen sent all away so that she may be alone with her thoughts. She had not been so desperately unhappy since the loss of her father – yet why? She had lost no one. She was still in her own palace, safe under the watchful eye of Caesar.

A flutter. Isis, no. Let it not be so. Be merciful, and let this pang *not* be over – of all the men under the heavens – *Julius Caesar*. Cleopatra had never allowed herself the girlish crushes of youth. She was too wise, even when young, to take such a chance, knowing no love of hers could ever be consummated. If not because of her rank, well...she rose and examined herself in her tall looking glass; she held her hair in as many flattering ways as she could, pulled at her night wrap in attempt to give her body some womanly curvature. What use was it? She had been told all her life she was, at worst, a very ugly girl – at best, well, not much even so.

And Caesar? Easy to say he was fifty two, old enough to be her father, and then dismiss it. But he looked far younger than his years, with a body still firm and muscled. Even with greying and sparse hair, his cool eyes and smooth manner charmed absolutely. At fifty two, he could swim a mile in his armor, could ride and shoot and fight in swordplay with a degree of skill far above those younger than himself. No matter what his age or position, women had thrown themselves upon him – the best, the most beautiful women of the entire world. And what had Cleopatra? A crown? That would not matter to him, he was a Roman. Wealth? He could take that easily, without her say-so or regard. Youth? Not something lacking in any other girl. Why, therefore, would the gods be so cruel as to curse her with *affection*.

Very serious, she leaned over her bureau, staring hard into her mirror and examining the dark circles forming under her eyes from lack of sleep. She did not speak in the self-pitying way of unhappy girls, but rather the anger and disappointment she was accustomed to leveling at herself when she had not done her absolute finest. “Better you should have caught the plague,” said Cleopatra, blowing a lock of hair from her face and scolding herself fiercely. “A queen does not act in a manner so pathetic. Now go to bed, you stupid little girl, and gain some sense.”

She followed her own instructions for bed – but did not sleep, nor was she able to gain anymore wit and drop her yearning for merciless (unknowing) Caesar.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Chiton – a Greek form of dress for both men and women, generally fastened at the shoulders and simply tied around the waist.

Imperator (ihm-pear-ah-toe) – Root word for the modern English “Imperial.” In Caesar's day it would have translated to “commander,” and would only be used to denote “emperor” after his death.

Legion – A Roman company of 5,000 men.

Liburnian – a single banked (think level) war ship. Its small size made it quick (see: http://www.thepirateking.com/ships/ship_types.htm)

Lictor – an official Roman bodyguard. Posts ranking from Consul and upwards would have had this guard. As Imperator, Caesar was entitled to twenty four, the highest possible amount.

Peplos – a Greek form of dress for both men and women, more folded than pinned and tied in such a manner as to create the appearance of a skirt separate from that which covers the abdomen.

Ptolemy (tall-uh-mee) – Name for basically all male descendants after Alexander the Great's general, who succeeded him in Egypt after his death.

Talent – I wish I could describe this as anything more clearly than “Bitch, it's money,” but I really can't. Seriously, just look it up on wikipedia if you want a detailed explanation. The metric system's involved and it's just too much for my pea brain. The drachma (plural drachmae) is a denomination of the talent. So, like....quarters and dollars, I have no freaking clue.

APPENDIX

Ancient Alexandria (I don't know why the image keeps getting cut, I tried my best to fix it. But you see most of what I mention anyway)

