



I: *The Fate of Dionysus*

30 BC, the Kalends of Sextilis, City of Alexandria in Egypt

As the heat of Egypt's early afternoon sun beat down on him, Triumvir Marcus Antonius knew the end was near. He guided his warhorse, Ariston, through the East Gate and to the right side of the main stone-cobbled boulevard, which ran west through the city of Alexandria. The boulevard's center was lined with Corinthian columns and decorated with stone benches, colorful pottery, various lush plants, late summer flowers, and marble statues of both Grecian and Egyptian gods. The warm breeze from the north off the coast did nothing to cool Antony off as he waded through the crowded street. He reached down and rubbed Ariston between the neck and shoulder on the right. Ariston let out a soft whinny, then returned his attention to the crowd.

The multitude of citizens and traders carried with them a myriad of odors. Shops and carts crammed together and filled both sides of the boulevard as buyers bartered for their purchases and vendors hawked and displayed their wares to every passerby. The city was a major port and trade epicenter of the Roman Empire; however, it was also renowned for its architects, astronomers, mathematicians, artisans, and physicians. It was home to the most extensive library ever built, and on the northern arm of its port sat one of the most extraordinary architectural feats in recent memory, the Pharos lighthouse. In addition, the city attracted a cultural mixture of Grecian, Roman, Egyptian, Judaeian, Syrian, Cyrenian, Cretan, Cypriots, Nubians, and many others. While Antony trotted Ariston to the palace, he reflected on the battle earlier in the morning.

He had rallied what men remained loyal to him, enough infantry and cavalry for one legion plus auxiliaries, along with his warships off the coast on the Eleusinian Sea. He then rushed out to meet Triumvir Gaius Octavius' forces on the fields between the hippodrome and the eastern gate. After he signaled his men to attack, Antony watched in shock as his warships lifted their oars and surrendered to Octavius' fleet. To his further dismay, his cavalry charged out and deserted him moments after the battle started. His infantry was caught in the middle and outnumbered by at least ten to one. Yet, to the last man, they fought with courage at his side until defeat was imminent.

Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, Octavius' general and commander of the Roman legions, held back most of his forces. He only sent in enough cohorts as deemed necessary to achieve victory. Once Agrippa was satisfied with Antony's humiliation, the command was issued for his men to cease combat. The defeated Triumvir was allowed to retreat to the palace with the remnants of his men. Those men now marched behind Ariston as he turned right and headed to the southern palace entrance. Ptolemy built the royal palace on a peninsula that formed the eastern arm of its port. The land between the gate and the exterior wall of the palace consisted of gardens, fountains, statues, and several shrines. Tall Ionic columns lined the road; between them were colossal onyx sphinxes, each reclining on a dais. As he rode past the sphinxes, Antony felt their eyes fixed upon him in judgment.

All his life, Antony believed the goddess Fortuna was at his side. He felt invincible because of it. Nevertheless, neither failure nor defeat was easy for him to accept. His first taste of both came just five years ago during his campaign in the mountains of Parthia, where he lost two-fifths of his army, an estimated 80,000 men, to the relentless winter while he retreated. His second defeat was on the sea at Actium, where he watched two-thirds of his fleet as it burned and sank. *Actium, a wound upon my soul which shall never heal. How many thousands died as I retreated? By rights, I should be at the bottom of the sea with my men, at peace with an honorable death.*

Pain brought Antony out of his thoughts. During the battle, he failed to block a slash to his upper left arm. He knew it would fester soon if left unattended. His right hand felt the wound under his shoulder guard, and the tops of his fingers came away with blood. It was not the first time he saw his blood. As a war veteran, bloodshed was commonplace, and the numerous scars he accumulated over the years were testimony to his survival skills and badges of honor. He used his tunic to wipe the blood off and sighed as fatigue seeped into his bones. His right knee ached, as it always did after any physical exertion, and his lower back throbbed. *Why do I feel so old and yet think I am still so young? Where did all the years go?*

Antony approached the Selene Gate, the south entrance to the exterior palace courtyard, and saw a formation of Egyptian and Grecian soldiers at the barracks to the right. They saluted Antony as he passed through the gate, though he felt he did not deserve it. The city's most prominent structure, the palace, was nestled against the eastern seawall, with its main entrance facing west to the port. The road between the port and his destination was lined with tall statues of Zeus, Hera, Athena, Demeter, and Poseidon on one side, while Ra, Isis, Horus, Hathor, and Thoth stood on the other. Corinthian columns, with a golden cloth draped between them, separated each statue. The long flight of stairs leading up to the palace was flanked by a pair of giant sphinxes, the width and length of a large wagon, and guarded by Nubian soldiers.

Antony rarely used the main entrance, so he veered to the right and followed the short path which led to the royal stables. He dismounted Ariston, handed the reins to one of the stable boys, removed his helmet, and tucked it under his left arm. He headed to the palace entrance north of the stables, which would take him through the servant's quarters.

Pain gnawed at him, and his muscles protested. He was exhausted. Octavius would be here soon. He knew there were no other alternatives left open to him except an honorable death by his hand. As he made his way to the palace, his slave, Eros, encountered him.

“Dominus?” The young dark-haired Grecian was surprised to see him. He noticed the dried blood on Antony’s hand. “Shall I call for Olympos?”

Antony shook his head. “Too late. Bring me some wine instead.”

“Yes, Dominus.” Eros bowed and fetched the wine, then followed his master. The palace halls were decorated with Egyptian and Grecian furniture and art accumulated over three hundred years. The Ptolemies invested much of their wealth into their palace, which was evident at every turn.

When Antony arrived at his quarters on the northwestern side of the palace, which offered a nice view of the Eleusinian Sea, he veered to the left side of the room. He tossed his helmet on the floor and collapsed on a gilded dining couch with plush azurite cushions. Eros handed him a cup and set the pitcher on the table beside him. “You looked surprised to see me. What news arrived here?” He asked as he took a deep drink of the wine. He knew it was Chian wine by the velvety dark-cherry flavor and violet aroma. It helped to take the edge off his weariness and divert his mind from the gash that throbbed near his shoulder.

Eros hesitated. “Your men were defeated, and you were lost in the battle.”

Antony looked up from his wine. “Where is she?”

The slave looked down at his feet.

“Out with it, boy! Where is the Queen?!”

“Sh-she was overcome with grief at the news of your death, Dominus. Charmian and Iras escorted her to the mausoleum. She intends to seal the entrance and take her life.” Eros cringed as Antony threw his cup down.

“Sons of Dis! Go to our tomb now! If she is still alive, let her know I survived the battle, and I shall come to her. If she is gone, you shall help me meet an honorable death. Hurry! Before the deed is done!” He barked the orders and watched Eros flinch and turn on his heel toward the door. “Run, boy!” He shouted as his attendant vanished through the doorway.

Antony rested his head back on the plush pillows of the couch and closed his eyes. The pain in his shoulder still nagged at him. He needed more wine. However, he was too tired to move, and the cushions' comfort was enough to entertain him with the thought of sleep. *How did it come to this? How could I have been so blind to Octavius' ambitions?*

Antony tended to see the good in others. He trusted and expected everyone to live by the same code of honor he was taught. Yet, as he put his mind to it, he began tracing the events that brought about this outcome. From Caesar’s assassination, the war and defeat of the Liberatores, the creation of the *Lex Titia* and subsequent formation of the Triumvirate, the division of the Empire, to the treaties at Brundisium and Tarentum, the exile of Lepidus, to the battle of Actium, it was now evident how Octavius manipulated the strings which granted him both power and authority over Antony and Rome. The boy

outsmarted everyone. *Once I am dead, he shall have no opposition and likely declare himself the absolute power in Rome.*

He laughed. *It was the thing Rome feared most. The reason Caesar died. His laughter faded at the thought of his fallen friend. What if I had returned to Rome and fought Octavius in the Senate? Could all of this have been averted?* Yet he knew such a course of action would have separated him from the woman he loved more than life itself. *Queen Cleopatra.*

From the instant he first laid eyes on her in Rome, he desired her. A great noise stirred within him. A noise that filled him, drove him, and consumed him. He surrendered himself, heart and soul, to her. Before Cleopatra, he had never met a woman who could match him as an equal in ambition, wit, appetite, sport, wine, and sex. They were kindred spirits, two halves of the same soul. Cleopatra was his wife and the mother of his children. There was no course of action for him that did not include her. He followed his heart, and now he had to face the consequences of his choice.

“You are alive?! Thank the gods!”

The feminine melodic voice pulled him out of his reverie. He opened his eyes. Before him stood a petite, fair-skinned Grecian woman dressed in a linen tunic dyed woad, the color of the midday sky. Draped over the tunic, she wore a long pleated silk fabric, dyed indigo, called a stola. At the hem of the stola, there were silver stars embroidered in a pattern that swirled upward to her well-endowed bosom. The sleeves of her stola were fastened across the tops of her arms with silver clasps adorned in lapis. Her long, dark hair hung down in waves to her waist despite being pinned up at the sides of her head and held in place by intricate silver pins. The whole ensemble was accentuated by her vibrant cobalt eyes and kohl-painted eyelids.

Nephele possessed a rare beauty, unlike any other woman he knew. Her high cheekbones drew Antony’s eyes to her full and sultry lips. He remembered what those lips tasted like. At age twenty-five, he traveled to Athens to study; by chance, they met at a banquet. Afterward, they caroused many long nights together. Though their friendship spanned over twenty years, she retained a youthful complexion. The gods blessed her, so it seemed.

He sighed. “Begone. I have no time to carouse or listen to your stories. I must face my death with honor once Eros returns with news of my wife.” He closed his eyes again to dismiss her from his presence.

“Is this to be the fate of Dionysus?”

“There is no alternative.” He opened his eyes and looked at her. “I am defeated. I have no men. No legions. They have all deserted me. I have no means of escape, nor do I wish to do so. There is no place I can hide where Octavius shall not find me. I refuse to be further dishonored by him.” His irritation strained his voice.

“Dishonored? How?” Her voice was full of concern.

Antony stared at her for a moment. “As you may know, when he landed at Pelusium a few weeks ago, I sent Antyllus with some gold and an offer. I challenged him

to single combat to resolve our dispute. Ever the *coward*, he refused. So I offered myself in exchange for the lives of my wife and children. I received his response last night.”

“And?” Her face was a mask of impatience.

He drew in a breath. “He cares not if I kill myself or leave the task to his men. He agreed to let our children live, except for Caesarion. As for the Queen, she is to be paraded through the streets of Rome, *in chains*, at his Triumph!” He shook his head. “I declined his counteroffer, of course.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Are you aware he sent your *wife* a proposal as well?” Her voice filled with disdain when she said ‘wife,’ and a hint of a smile crossed her lips when he shook his head.

“Go on.” He felt his anger rise. Nephele never hid the fact she disliked his choice to marry Cleopatra. Their friendship waxed and waned over the years. Yet, once he settled permanently in Alexandria, she arrived unannounced and joined the Inimitable Livers Society he and Cleopatra formed. She remained at his side ever since.

“He asked for your head as payment for her life and your children's lives. He promised her no harm would befall Caesarion and she could keep her throne provided she accompanied him back to Rome as his *guest*.”

“Guest? Prisoner, more like. He tried to create dissension between us; little good it did him.” His shoulder ached again, and he grimaced.

“Are you wounded?”

“Does it matter?”

“I suppose not.” She crossed her arms and stared at him for a few minutes. Finally, she shook her head and made a sound with her mouth, which conveyed annoyance. “You force my hand when I am ill-prepared for it. I shall return. Do not do anything *foolish* while I am gone.” She turned and departed the room.

Antony stared at the doorway after Nephele was gone. It was not the first time she exhibited odd behavior in his presence. She was always peculiar for all the years he had known her, and he attributed it to her eccentric nature. He grunted as he forced himself to sit up. He took a cup off the table and poured himself some wine. He downed half the contents before he set the cup on the table again. His muscles protested as he stood up, and pain shot through his shoulder and knee. He ignored them as he unbuckled his balteus, which carried the twin swords at either side of his hips. He took both sheathed gladii in hand and examined them. They were gifts from Julius Caesar after they conquered Gaul together. The hilts were made from ivory and carved with great detail into an eagle head, the symbol of Rome’s honor and power. The scabbards were decorated in dark gold, and at their center was an ornate relief profile of Hercules wearing his Nemean lion head pelt. The same relief was on his muscle cuirass.

The Antonii were descendants of the Herculean bloodline, so it was appropriate for him to wear the icon of his ancestor. He treasured these swords and carried them into every battle. He set them on the couch and unfastened the cloak from his breastplate. He was accustomed to Eros’ assistance with his armor, so it took him a little longer to unbuckle his cuirass. As he set the breastplate on the couch, it felt like a great burden

was lifted from his chest. The betrayal of his men and his defeat this morning still hung heavy on his conscience. He removed the scarf around his neck and tossed it down with the rest. He tugged on his linen tunic, which hung to his knees, to cool himself off. It was dyed ruber, the color of dried blood, and matched his focale. He picked up one of the swords and unsheathed it. The finely crafted steel blade reflected the lamplight as it caught it. He reached over to the couch table, picked up his wine cup, and finished its contents.

Antony turned and surveyed his room. Centered along the wall opposite him was a large raised bed of ebony, its four posts carved with an intricate twist and gilded accents. Sheer curtains in a pale woad color draped from each of them. The headboard bore a gilded pictogram of Ramses II in his chariot at the Battle of Kadesh. A large wooden chest containing his possessions was at the foot of the bed. Several statues were on display to the right of the bed in front of the balcony. Each marble sculpture was placed far enough from the next to allow for good viewing. His eyes passed over the collection until he spotted Alexander the Great. He walked over to the statue and stared at the intricate craftsmanship and painted marble. The tan-skinned youthful face was surrounded by a head full of lion-colored curls, and his eyes, the color of the Eleusinian Sea, stared out into the unknown. He only wore a kermes-dyed toga, its hue akin to freshly spilled blood, which allowed for a good view of his athletic physique. His right hand held up a Macedonian sarissa, the spear he used to conquer the known world.

“Could I not have chosen a better place to die than within these walls? Here, where you walked among us.” He asked the statue as he stared up into its lifeless eyes. “Yet, who am I to compare myself to the greatness that stands before me? Alexander, the man who was made king at age twenty. Alexander, the undefeated general who carved out an empire from Greece to India. Alexander, the visionary who dared to unite the world under one banner. Alexander, the conqueror. Alexander, the genius. Alexander, the god. What did you accomplish in thirty-two years that I have failed to achieve in my fifty-three? Who am I to you at whose tomb I wept?” He paused and waited for an answer.

There was silence.

“Alexander. Even the mighty Caesar shed tears for your greatness.” He turned to the right and approached a pedestal upon which a painted bust of Gaius Julius Caesar was displayed. “Yet, who am I to compare myself to the greatness of Caesar? Caesar, the man who was given the Civic Crown at age nineteen. Caesar, the cunning general who added both Spain and Gaul to the Empire. Caesar, the dictator who brought reforms and improvements to the People of Rome. Caesar, the conqueror. Caesar, the wise. Caesar, the divine. Your words and deeds have deified you for all eternity. Who am I to you at whose pyre I wept?” He paused again and waited for an answer.

There was silence.

“Caesar. Did I not shed tears for your greatness?” He looked upon the portrait of his friend one last time, then turned and drifted to the next pedestal, which displayed a bust carved and painted in his likeness.

“And who is Marcus Antonius beside such men? What part of the world did they leave for me to conquer? What greatness did they leave for me to achieve? Are the Fates so cruel as to cast me forever in their shadow? To hold me forever one step away from glory? What words and deeds shall Antony be remembered by? Am I not Antony the great? Does not the blood of mighty Hercules flow through my veins? Am I not Antony the divine? Does not the wine of Dionysus flow from my cup? Am I not Antony the conqueror? Do the battles and victories I have won for the glory of Rome mean nothing? Shall the empire I have built for my children turn to dust? Shall anyone shed tears for my greatness?” He paused as he stared into his own storm-colored eyes.

There was silence.

“How shall the historians remember me? Shall they omit my victories and flaunt my failures? Shall they rebuke me for my defeat at Parthia? Or worse yet, for my disaster at Actium?” He paused as he raised his left hand in a broad motion. “Or shall I be reduced to a single epitaph, ‘Here lies Marcus Antonius, the Triumvir and Master of the Roman East who renounced his empire and titles, his legions and conquests, his glory and honor, all for the love of a woman whose name was Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator, the last Queen of Egypt.’” He regretted his words when his hand fell back to his side.

All for the love of a woman.

Those words echoed in his head. Yet, Cleopatra was not just any woman. He had been from one end of the Empire to the other. Power. Beauty. Wealth. Intelligence. Wit. Passion. Charm. She possessed it all. Fadia, Cytheris, Fulvia, and Glaphyra all paled by comparison. Cleopatra embodied every attribute he looked for in a companion and wife. There would never be another woman like her. *The world can burn for all I care if she is not in it.*

He lifted his gladius and stared at the steel blade as it glinted in the lamplight. “If only the Fates could have given us more time.” He let out a sigh filled with regret. “Time. The thing we desire most, yet it slips through our grasp like grains of sand; both incalculable and unforgiving.”

He realized Eros should have been back by now. It must have meant his wife was dead. Last night they discussed the options left open to them if they lost the battle this morning. They both agreed that an honorable death was preferred to imprisonment at the hands of Octavius. They both took solace in knowing they would soon reunite in the afterlife. He kissed her and made love to her in a frenzy at first, then later with slow and deliberate passion. It was a bittersweet memory he held onto while in battle this morning. Part of him hoped to see her face one last time before he died; however, if she was already gone, there was nothing to do now but join her on the other side.

He turned the tip of his gladius towards himself and rested it below his ribcage. *How many countless men have I killed with this blade? It is odd to think I am the last to die upon it.* For a moment, fear gripped him. His death lay in one swift thrust of his hand. He always thought he would either die a glorious, honorable death in battle or grow old with his wife as they watched their children rule the empire they created. But the gods had other plans, it seemed. He closed his eyes and drew in a breath.

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