

Guardian
of the
Flame

T.L. Higley

In a lofty tower set high above a teeming city,
There lived a solitary woman
Whose guilt and pain had long ago turned to ugliness.
And when the ugliness became its own prison,
And the pain of rejection too much to bear,
Loneliness seemed the only answer.

Chapter 1

Alexandria, Egypt

48 B.C.

Sophia pressed her forehead against the chilled window glass of her private chamber and tried to capture a glimpse of life, far below and out of reach.

The harbor, more than one hundred cubits down, churned with boats whose sails flapped in the dying sun like the scales of white fish, and with ant-sized servants who scurried to deliver supplies to her lighthouse before its Keeper punished them for their delay.

On a white-cushioned couch behind her, one of Euripides's plays called for her return to its lines of tragedy. She resisted. The words had already bled into her heart with remembrances she wished to avoid.

Enough foolishness. Shoulders back and eyes unblinking, she crossed the room to a cedarwood desk. Her astronomy charts covered the wall above, but it was a more practical papyrus that she spread on its surface. She weighted the top corners with two small statuettes of Isis and Osiris with a muttered apology to the gods, and let the bottom corners curl upon themselves. The late afternoon sun burned through the window, setting dust particles afire in the air and touching the lighthouse's fuel consumption chart and the scrawled labor requirements. Sophia retrieved her sharpened reed and ink and added notations to the latest entry.

Work first. Then she could spend the evening brooding over Euripides's plays, and even the past.

Behind her, sharp knuckles attacked the outside of her door. Only

one person knocked like that, and only one person would bother to make the climb halfway up the lighthouse's three hundred cubits.

The door flew open before she invited entrance. Her personal servant stumbled in, eyes wide.

Sophia jumped to her feet. "Romans?"

Ares leaned against a marble stand that held the sculpted bust of Plato, winded. The heavy-footed Roman legion marched into Alexandria several weeks earlier. Sophia had been waiting for war, as one waits for a ship returning from far-off trade. *Knowing it will come, never certain when.*

But Ares was shaking his head. "She's here! She climbed over the —"

Ares was shoved aside and another figure slid into the room. Sophia's heart danced over a few beats, then settled into a staccato. The young woman before her smiled, the languid look of a woman who knows her own power. "Sophia--" she extended both her jeweled hands. "How I have missed you!"

Sophia let out her breath with one quiet word. "Cleopatra!" She waved to her servant. "Leave us, Ares."

The boy backed out of the room.

"And not a word of this!" Sophia called after him.

When he had closed the door she took a hesitant step toward the younger woman. "How? Have you made peace at last with your brother?"

Cleopatra flung the question aside with a wave of her hand. "The little brat knows nothing of monarchy. It is those three leeches that hiss in his ears that are the problem." She spotted the black and gold *kylix* of wine and brightened. "I am parched." She crossed to the table and ladled wine into an alabaster cup. "The sea, you know." She filled another cup

and handed it to Sophia.

Sophia studied her, speechless. Her magnetic power seemed undimmed by her recent exile. Her white robe, trimmed in gold and purple, hung a bit more loosely on her frame.

“You are thinner.” Cleopatra sipped the wine and grimaced. No doubt it had been left too long in the bowl. “Will you never cease to fret over me, Sophia?”

Sophia’s breathing had returned to normal, and she found a place on the couch. “Sit. Tell me.”

Cleopatra came to her, dropped a knee to the couch, then curled herself next to Sophia like a leopard settling to rest. She lifted the skull of a panther from the low table before them and turned it around with her long fingers.

“Did you get in unseen?” Sophia asked.

“Apollodorus rowed me into the harbor in a small boat. We docked in the Eunostos Harbor, away from the crowds. I climbed ashore at the base of the lighthouse and circled to the door. I am safe here, Sophia.”

Sophia swallowed. “Why take such a risk?”

“It has been an eventful few days.” Cleo set the skull back on the table with a *thunk*.

“I thought you were in Syria.”

“I was. My little brother Ptolemy and his three sycophants are camped at Pelusium, with their armies ready to attack my troops. But I believe the gods have other plans.” She smiled again, the scheming grin Sophia had known and loved since Cleopatra’s childhood.

“What have you done?” Sophia closed tight fingers around the girl’s wrist, as fear clamped itself around her heart.

Cleopatra inclined her head and laughed, then stroked Sophia’s

arm with her fingertips. “An opportunity has come to me on the heels of Ptolemy’s foolishness.”

“So what has your brother done?”

“The Roman Pompey fled to my brother, hoping for Ptolemy’s support against Julius Caesar. But Ptolemy’s three advisors decided they would rather gain the favor of Caesar. They greeted Pompey with a knife point.”

“He is dead?”

Cleopatra nodded. “And now Caesar has arrived here in the city.” She crossed one leg over the other and bounced her foot. “My brother’s men sent him Pompey’s head as a gift. Caesar was furious at his adversary’s ignoble death.”

Sophia slapped her thigh. “These barbaric Romans. Impossible to comprehend. They stomp all over the world with their insatiable lust to conquer, but when someone kills their enemy, they are angered.”

Cleopatra’s eyes glittered. “Yes, he sounds fascinating, doesn’t he?”

Sophia’s apprehension returned. . “What are you going to do?”

“Take advantage of the opportunity.”

“It is not safe for you in the city, Cleopatra. You must return to Syria, under the protection of your troops.”

Cleopatra removed her hand from Sophia’s arm and unfolded herself from the couch. “You would have me remain a child forever! I am no longer your student.”

Sophia stood as well, matching the fire in Cleopatra’s eyes with her own. “You are twenty-one!”

Cleopatra flung her hair over her shoulder. Her face was a mere handspan from Sophia’s. Her voice was low. “And I am Queen of Egypt.”

Sophia shifted away, but Cleopatra clutched at her, spun her back to herself. “Do not be angry with me, my Sophia. Tell me you love me still.”

Sophia sighed. *I could never control her.* “Would I have spent all those painful hours teaching you the languages of Egypt if I did not love you?”

Cleopatra lips formed a pout, reinforcing her youth. “You were well-paid by my father.”

Sophia touched Cleopatra’s cheek. “And I would have done it for nothing.”

The younger woman’s expression cleared. “There, now you have made me happy. Next you must tell me how beautiful I look in spite of my thinness, and then I will be satisfied.”

Sophia looked over the queen’s long reddish-brown curls, her regal features, the fine fabric of her robe and the twinkling jewels stitched to her headpiece and wrapped around her arms and fingers. “Cleopatra, as always, you are stunning.”

The girl fluttered her eyelashes playfully. “You have them all fooled, Sophia. But not me.” She pointed to Sophia’s masculine tunic, carelessly belted. “I know the real woman beneath all your manly clothes and your harsh manner. I know there is something good buried.”

Sophia’s inner restlessness stilled, as though she had grown cold. She nodded once, unable to answer, and then retreated to the couch. *Let us speak of something else.*

Cleopatra dropped beside her, and leaned her head against Sophia’s shoulder with a sigh. The sun’s last rays splashed through the west window and lit up the gold trim that edged her robe.

“What will you do?” Sophia whispered, knowing she would not like

the answer.

Cleopatra did not lift her head. "Caesar is ill-disposed toward my brother and his advisors tonight. I will cause his favor to fall on me."

"And how will you accomplish this?"

Cleo laughed. "I know it has been a long time, Sophia. But do not tell me you have forgotten how a woman can gain the favor of a man."

Sophia pulled away from her. "No, Cleo. No."

Cleopatra tossed her hair over her shoulder. "I have only this brief moment to gain his favor. My brother will surely arrive by tomorrow. It must be tonight."

Sophia's stomach clenched. "You are young, inexperienced. And he is a Roman!"

"The world is changing."

Sophia exhaled heavily. "For over two hundred years your family has ruled Egypt. The Egyptians have come to accept that. And you understand their ways. You respect their love of knowledge, you share their desire to decipher the world. You have even embraced their gods. But these Romans, Cleo, they are crude savages, interested only in blood and victory and power!"

Cleopatra looked away, to the darkening window. "I think you forget how interested in power I am myself, Sophia."

She traced Cleo's strong jawline. "Born to rule. Raised to rule. Queen at eighteen." *And exile in the face of your brother's treachery has done nothing to dull the hunger.* "Can I not talk you out of this foolishness?"

Cleopatra's lips twitched in amusement. "There we are. I knew you would come around." She pulled Sophia toward her and once more leaned against her shoulder. "Just let me stay until the darkness has fully

fallen.” She sighed deeply. “I am so tired.”

Sophia relaxed into the cushions and took the weight of Cleopatra’s exhaustion. The girl was asleep in moments, leaving Sophia to her own thoughts. She let Cleo sleep as the evening wasted.

Her hair hung over Sophia’s shoulder, where her own hair would have lain if she had not cropped it close to her head. She stroked Cleopatra’s robe with one finger, then draped the fabric over her own thigh.

She is everything I am not.

And yet despite their differences, Sophia always found herself more whole in Cleo’s presence. The girl was like pressed oil, filling in the cracks and brittle places of Sophia’s soul with something warm and smooth. When they were together, all the tension and anger that seemed to define Sophia ran out of her, leaving her feeling almost human.

Sophia had begun to doze as well when Ares’s knuckle-bruising knock again sounded at the door. She glanced down to Cleopatra, but the girl’s gentle breathing continued. She shifted her to the cushions, then slipped away to open the door.

“For the love of Isis, Ares, what is it now?”

He stepped in, one hand still on the door. “A message for you, *Abbas*.” He held a scrap of papyrus. She pushed him into the hall and half-closed the door behind them.

Ares had called her *abbas* since he was a young boy.. Whether the Egyptian word for “lion” was a compliment or a slight depended on each of their moods.

Ares peered over her shoulder, into her chamber.

“Well, give the thing to me, Ares! Don’t simply stand there!”

Ares sighed and held it up to her. “Brought by one of the Library’s

slaves.” He stepped close and held the message to her eyes.

Sophia moved back a pace. “You don’t need to breathe all over me!” She snatched the scrap and read it, her pulse quickening at the request inked there.

“Will you go?”

She scowled at Ares. “Reading my messages now?”

The young man, though half her age, stood much taller than Sophia. He gave her one of his crooked half-grins. “It is a long climb.”

She shoved the papyrus back into his hand and turned away. “There is nothing in the Library that cannot be brought here to me. Send a message to Sosigenes that he may visit me here in the lighthouse if he wishes.”

“The message sounded urgent.”

She whirled on him. “Then I suppose he should run!” Ares pursed his lips, and Sophia exhaled. This boy knew her well by now. He had long ceased to be offended or intimidated by her moods. “Why can Sosigenes not send a report as usual?” she asked herself aloud.

“Perhaps he thinks it is time for you to emerge from hiding.”

“I am not hiding!” Sophia put a hand out to the door. “I rarely need to leave the lighthouse. Why should today be different?”

“Because today someone has asked.”

The door blurred before her. It was true, no one had requested her presence in the city for a great while. “They fear me.”

Ares’s laugh was soft. “Yes, the mighty Artemis, commanding the world from her high tower.”

Sophia’s lips curled into a sneer and she faced the boy again. “Which am I, Ares, a lion or a goddess?”

He lowered his eyes. “Both need sometimes to emerge from soli-

tude.”

“Well, not today. Send the message to Sosigenes. And send ten drachma with it, to remind him under whose patronage he spends his hours.”

Ares bowed his head and turned to the ramp, his silence seeming to condemn her.

Sophia closed her eyes and pressed her fingers into the bridge of her nose. She disliked leaving the lighthouse, and it annoyed her that the old scholar would summon her. She pushed back the thought that Ares’s comments were the true source of her irritation, then reentered her private rooms and lit several lamps. The flames played on the deep reds and blacks of the room’s furnishings, on which she had spared no expense. The luxury of her chamber rivaled any in the palace. The money that flowed continually to the lighthouse enabled her to live as she wished.

She retrieved the wine Cleo had poured. At the window, she lifted the cup to the harbor in a silent salute, then sipped the wine, ignoring its bitter finish. *Yes, I live as I wish.*

And every day the ever-present sea breezes whispered in her ear like a spiteful friend who would never let her forget.

She spent an hour over the charts, fine-tuning the plans for the coming month, searching for the slightest opportunity to increase efficiency. When the first noises shot up the cylindrical core of the lighthouse, Sophia barely noticed.

Moments later she dropped her reed on the desk, startling Cleopatra. The girl gasped, then heard the shouts. She turned wide eyes to Sophia. “Who is it?”

Sophia tilted her head to the noise again. Her fingers tightened on

her chair.

“Soldiers.”

Chapter 2

Sophia placed herself between the door and Cleopatra. Cleo's servant, Apollodorus, was the first through the door. He burst in without knocking and scanned the dark room, his swarthy features tense.

"I am here," Cleopatra said, standing.

"Soldiers, my queen."

"Ptolemy's?"

He shook his head. "Romans."

Sophia crossed to the door. "Do they know she is here?"

"I know nothing more." The servant circled Sophia to stand near Cleopatra.

"Stay here," Sophia said. "I will get rid of them."

Cleopatra bit her lip. "Be cautious."

Sophia nodded, then left the room and began the descent down the spiral ramp, her chest pounding. Cleopatra should not have come, should not have risked capture. *And I should have sent her away to safety.* A sheen of perspiration broke over her forehead. She would keep her word, and get rid of the Romans.

Sophia's quarters were in the first of the three tiers of the mighty lighthouse, also the tallest. If she tilted her head backward while descending the interior ramp, she could see straight up through the octagonal second tier and cylindrical third, to the final platform, where the light guided ships into the harbor.

The first tier held nearly fifty rooms, positioned around the spiraling ramp that led to the massive Base. Sophia ran lightly down the ramp, accustomed to the incline's pull on her legs. Over the rail, she could see the torchlit bottom floor filling with the clanking ranks of barbarians.

“They’ve all gone to bed,” Ares was saying to one of them. “You will have to come back another time.”

“We have orders, boy,” a strident voice answered. Sophia could see the speaker advance on Ares. He did not look into the gloom above him to see her descent.

She reached the bottom of the spiral and pushed into the ranks that crowded the center hall. “What is this?” She raised her voice above the shuffle of studded sandals on the stone floor.

The group turned as one. A soldier stepped forward, the air of command about him.

“Are you master of the lighthouse, sir?” He spoke in Latin.

Sophia raised her head, let the torchlight play on her face. The soldier stepped back. “I ask your pardon, mistress. I did not realize—”

“Yes, I am Keeper of the lighthouse. What is the meaning of—of this?” She extended her hand to the sweating mass of leather and metal packed into the chamber. The torches rammed into wall sockets reflected from a thousand metal discs.

“We are here at Caesar’s request, mistress. He wishes to meet with Cleopatra Philopator and her brother Ptolemy XIII and has summoned them to the royal palace.”

Sophia shoved aside the soldiers to face the one who addressed her. His uniform differed from the others, with a crest of horsehair across his helmet. A red cloak of fine material hung from his left shoulder, and he wore waist-length chain mail armor and an ornate belt. Sophia did not miss the sword and dagger strapped to his body.

“Summoned them to the palace?” she repeated. “Do you mean to their *own* palace?” She looked him up and down, not even trying to hide her disdain. Two soldiers lowered long *pila* across the commander, the

spears forming an X across his chest.

“Julius Caesar has taken up residence there, yes.”

She laughed. “You say ‘taken up residence’ as though you are civilized men and not a plague of insects that has crawled out of the harbor to gorge on the wealth of Egypt.”

The soldier removed his helmet and glared at her. “I am Lucius Aurelius Bellus, Pilus Prior of the First Centuria of the Sixth Cohort.” He took a step toward her. “Men have been killed for words less offensive than yours.”

“Perhaps I should use a language other than your own then, to tell you what I think of you and your Sixth Cohort. What shall it be? Greek? Egyptian?”

Bellus straightened and pierced her with his hard gaze. “The choice is yours, mistress,” he said in Greek, and then switched to Egyptian. “I would be happy to debate you in any language.”

A learned Roman soldier? She fought to keep the momentary admiration from her expression, and instead lifted her chin. “I was not aware that Caesar trained his soldiers in anything more than separating men from their heads.” Inwardly, she cursed the note of respect that had crept into her voice.

Bellus grinned. He pushed aside the crossed *pila* and stepped from the ranks to speak to her quietly. “He does not. But we have some moments of leisure to pursue other interests.”

Sophia looked away from his smile and smoothed a hand over her tunic. Learned in languages or not, the man was a Roman, and he had brought his beasts into her lighthouse.

“The queen, mistress.” Bellus murmured, too near her ear. “Is she present?”

Sophia put a hand to the back of her neck, to the hair she kept trimmed too short. “Of course not. She would not be so foolish. Take your cohort and leave at once!”

“Oh, this is not the cohort, mistress. This is only the first centuria of the sixth cohort. A cohort—”

“I care nothing for your military organization! You do not belong in my lighthouse or my Egypt, and I would see you all drowned in the harbor!”

Bellus’s pleasantries faded and his hand drifted to his sword. “Take care, mistress. Or I may forget again that you are a woman.”

Sophia blinked once, then crossed her arms. “You are not welcome here,” she said in a low voice.

Bellus tilted his head to look up the ramp, and Sophia’s shoulders tensed. She stilled herself, purposing that he should not see her concern. But then he gave her another piercing stare, replaced his helmet, and commanded his men to exit the lighthouse. They filed through the courtyard to the south entrance in pairs, with Bellus at the rear. Before he disappeared through the doorway, he turned. Sophia could see his glare burning past the cheek plates of his helmet. “If you should see the queen—”

“If I should see the queen, I should tell her that Egypt is in grave danger and she must find a way to secure her from foreigners who would take the best of her and feed it to blood-thirsty soldiers.”

Bellus’s eyes hardened, and his right hand crossed to his left side, where his *pugio* hung from his belt. He turned back to his men without a word, and they slipped into the Egyptian night to cross the lengthy causeway that separated her island from the city.

Sophia expelled a nervous breath and leaned back against the

wall. She braced her fingers against the cool stone behind her and slowed her breathing and her heart. The image of Bellus's intriguing smile rippled through her memory and she brushed it aside. Better to remember his insults.

"Interesting Roman."

Sophia spun to find Ares at the base of the ramp, arms folded and sly look in his eyes. Sophia straightened and lifted her chin. "He may know languages, but he does not know Egypt. And he does not know Cleopatra."

She crossed the hall, pushed past Ares, and began the ascent to her private quarters.

Several more lamps had been lit since she had run down to deal with the intrusion. Apollodorus stood in the center of her room.

Sophia searched the chamber. "Where is she? What has she done?"

Muted laughter came from the side of the room where one of her tapestry carpets had been partially rolled. Apollodorus shrugged, went to the rug, and lifted it from the queen. She looked up from where she lay on her belly, then propped herself on her elbows with a cunning wink. "It is time, Sophia."

Sophia jabbed a thumb over her shoulder. "Caesar's troops are prowling for you. Ptolemy's spies are everywhere. And you expect to walk out of here?"

Cleopatra jumped to her feet and embraced Sophia. "Not walk, no. Quickly, find Apollodorus some clothes, something to make him appear a merchant."

"A merchant?" Sophia looked to the servant, who again had nothing more than a shrug for her.

Cleopatra's eyes flashed. "A merchant with a special gift for Caesar the conqueror. For his eyes only. An expensive carpet."

"This is madness, Cleo. You will never reach Caesar without being spotted. And who knows but his summoning of you is only a ruse to bring you out, where he can make an end of you?"

Cleopatra was tying up her hair. "The clothes, Sophia! Quickly!"

Sophia exhaled her frustration, went to her door, and called down the shaft of the lighthouse to Ares, directing him to bring the appropriate clothing.

Minutes later, they were all assembled in the South Wing of the Base, with Cleopatra stretched upon the carpet and Apollodorus in a tasseled cap and wide belt. Apollodorus rolled the queen into the rug. Ares helped him heave it upon his shoulder. The carpet balanced there, bent slightly at both ends, and Cleo grunted. "Make quick work of this, Apollodorus," she said.

Sophia rested her forehead on the rough underside of the carpet. "Promise me, Cleo," she whispered. "Promise me you will be safe."

The wriggling of the carpet ceased, and Sophia strained to hear Cleopatra's muffled response. "No one has taught me better how to be a woman of great strength, Sophia. Now it is time for you to see what I can accomplish."

Sophia nodded to Apollodorus. "Go," she said. And then called after him as he moved through the doorway, "And I want my carpet back!"

She followed them out, watched the rolled carpet bounce on the servant's shoulder as he climbed down the steps from the Base, its massive red granite blocks joined with molten lead and looming over them. He scrambled down the steep path, slid once and used a hand for bal-

ance. Their small boat was moored on the western side of the lighthouse island. Apollodorus would row around the tip of the island that separated the two harbors, then across the Great Harbor to the other side, where the royal palace boasted its own private quay. It would be the middle of the night before they arrived. Strange time for such a gift.

The Roman has no idea what a gift he will receive.

To her left, a lone figure with a small torch crossed the causeway to the lighthouse. Sophia reentered the lighthouse, but did not return to her chamber, knowing that some message approached.

The servant that entered was from the Library, sent back by Sosigenes, perhaps.

“What is it?” she said.

The boy looked both surprised and frightened to be greeted by Sophia herself. His mouth dropped open, and his torch-hand lowered until the flames nearly licked his chin.

Sophia braced her hands on her hips. “Well? Do you have a message for me or not? Does Sosigenes refuse to come?” She had been sure a reminder of who paid for his life-style would have brought submission.

“He has fled, mistress. They all have.”

Sophia’s eyes narrowed. “Romans?”

His lower lip trembled. “Yes, mistress. Soldiers. In the Library.”

“Not reading, I suppose?” She looked toward the eastern windows, across the Great Harbor, to where the Library and Museum stood near the palaces.

“No, mistress. They scatter the scrolls like kindling.”

“Yes, of course they do. Looking for coins, no doubt.” She looked through an eastern window, toward the royal quarter. “The addlebrained

fools do not realize that they shove aside something far more valuable.” She turned on the boy. “But you said that Sosigenes and the others have fled?”

He bobbed his head and blinked. “They are saying that Caesar wants to gather up all of them, to force scholars to give him their secrets.”

Sophia rubbed at the tension in her forehead. “Perhaps one Roman *does* see more value in understanding the world than conquering it, then. Do you have any message for me?”

He seemed to remember his duty at last and pulled a rolled papyrus from his belt with shaky fingers.

She grabbed it from him. The note was from Sosigenes, short and dire: *“Sophia, All that we have worked for is in danger. Your husband’s work, my own, and the others. I have news too important to write. Take care and trust no one. I will send word soon. Sosigenes.”*

She waved the boy away, then went to the nearby window, the scroll held loosely at her side.

Sosigenes had been friend and mentor to her husband, many years ago. Since then, she had flooded the Library and the Museum with the support of her money, enabling dozens of mathematicians, astronomers, and inventors to pursue their theories without thought of earning their own bread. Kallias would have been proud of her efforts, pleased that in spite of everything, she still believed that the scholarship flowing from the Temple of the Muses would one day change the world.

The Great Harbor crawled with the lamps of a hundred ships at port, floating with fragrant Arabian myrrh and cinnamon from India, silk from the Far East and cedar from Lebanon. The ships would disgorge their luxuries into the insatiable city, then feast again on Egyptian emeralds and amethysts, on Nubian gold and ivory, even salt from the mines

of Mali.

Alexandria, center of the world.

And yet, all of it now threatened by family betrayal and foreign intervention. The Museum, the Library, the scholars. These were Sophia's only reason to continue. If they fell, if they were trampled under the sandals of Roman soldiers, what would become of her?

She squinted into the night, her eyes roaming every craft in the water.

Somewhere out there, in one small boat, a young Greek woman rolled in a carpet had the power to change history.

Sophia spread her fingers against the glass.

Have you any idea of what is at stake, Cleopatra? You hold us all in your hands.

Chapter 3

The little boat surged and dipped through the waters of the Great Harbor, until Cleopatra, in her flax cocoon, thought she might be sick. The idea amused her, actually. What would Sophia say about her precious carpet then?

Ah, Sophia. Cleopatra smiled and felt her tense muscles relax. She'd counted on her former tutor for reassurance and support, and Sophia had not failed. It had been good to spend the hours with her. Cleopatra felt strengthened for the task ahead.

"How much farther, Apollodorus?"

The servant shushed her. "We are too near other ships for conversation, my queen. It is not much farther. I can see the entrance to the royal harbor."

I have been gone too long.

She rubbed her cheek against the roughness of the fibers and sighed, remembering the lovely harbor built at the base of her palace, exclusively for royal use. Wrapped up as she was, she regretted that she would see none of the marble steps that led from the harbor to the palace entrance, the terracotta pots overflowing with yellow chrysanthemums, the jumping fountains in the center of the royal gardens.

Ah well, tomorrow all would be changed.

Cleopatra had no doubts regarding her plan, nor her ability to succeed. She had been trained for this moment by a family of ruthless politicians, a city obsessed with beauty, and a tutor who had filled her mind with enough knowledge and quick thinking to impress any man. Yes, she was well-equipped to deal even with Julius Caesar, the Conqueror.

"Quiet now, my queen," Apollodorus warned, and then she heard

the bumping of other small craft tied up to the dock and the lap of seawater against the stone pilings. She remained motionless, ears sharp to identify her servant's every movement as he climbed from the boat, pulled the rope, secured it to the cleat, then returned, steadying himself in the bottom. She felt his hands under her body, and turned slightly to face downward as he lifted.

No doubt he is glad I have grown thinner in exile.

The boat pitched and rolled, and she felt certain they would both be in the chilly water in a moment, but then Apollodorus regained his balance.

A few steps across and one step up, and she felt they were on the solid marble of the palace quay. She exhaled her relief, and her breath came back to her, warm, and still perfumed with honey.

She smiled in her dark shroud. *I am coming Caesar. And we shall see who is the conqueror.*

Her father, the late Ptolemy XII, had constructed his palace to appear as though it fronted both the harbor and the city. Cleopatra bounced inside the carpet, through what she knew were the gardens that spilled down to the edge of the harbor, along the colonnaded hall that bordered the harbor garden, and up the eight marble steps that led to the entrance. Even at night, the marble would be gleaming white, the light of a dozen courtyard torches reflected from the polished stone.

She shifted inside her wrappings, trying to dislodge Apollodorus's bony shoulder from her ribs. She felt him slow and held still.

"State your business." The hard voice called through the night, and her heart seized. Ptolemy's men could be anywhere about, ready to run her through if she were spotted. But these two spoke Latin, not Egyptian.

“A gift for Caesar,” Apollodorus replied.

Cleopatra heard the scrape of metal and the shuffle of boots. Two soldiers, perhaps.

“What kind of gift comes at this hour?”

“Only the finest,” her servant answered. “Too precious to risk being seen.”

The voice moved closer. “You speak like a Roman and dress like an Egyptian merchant. Which is it?”

Apollodorus rolled his shoulder under her. She tried to lift her weight from him in part.

“Born in Sicily, but long on the seas, finding my fortune.”

The smooth scrape of metal again, as though a sword had been drawn. Cleopatra held her breath, half-expecting to be run through with that sword, and tasting fear for the first time “You’ll find no fortune here, Sicilian. And Caesar is in no need of purchases.”

“A gift, I told you. I ask nothing.”

There was a pause, and Apollodorus took advantage of the moment. “Though if Caesar should wish to show appreciation...”

The soldiers laughed, and Cleopatra felt some of the tension in Apollodorus lessen.

“Who sends this gift for Caesar?”

“The queen.”

She loved the way he said it with pride, even now with her in exile. More laughter. “Not much of a queen, we hear. Running from —” “She is Queen of Egypt. No squalling brother’s claims, nor the claims of his power-lusting advisors, will change that.”

Careful, Apollodorus. You’re just a merchant from Sicily.

He continued, as though to soften his words. “And the rightful

queen of Egypt sends a gift to Caesar.”

“Give it over, then. We’ll see that he gets it.”

“I promised delivery. The queen wishes me to place the gift before Caesar myself.”

Another pause.

“Fine. Take it to him then.”

“Can you direct me to his chamber?”

“Oh, we’ll do more than that.”

They started with a lurch, and Cleopatra closed her eyes, relief sweeping her. She trained her ears on the sounds of their feet, and could hear that one soldier led them and the other followed.

It will not be long now.

The corridors of the palace, though web-like, were her childhood home, and it took little concentration to follow their route through the audience hall, under the lofty square-cut doorway into the corridor that housed a dozen apartments for officials and royal family members. Though Greek, the Ptolemies had built their succession of palaces with Egyptian architecture incorporated, to please those they ruled with uneasy peace. This corridor especially had been her favorite, with its carved reliefs of the history of Egypt and of the sun god Ra, with his great golden orb, bestowing favor on Ptolemy XII as they sailed the sky together in Ra’s barque.

Which chambers would Caesar have appropriated for his own? There would be many vacant since her hasty departure. Those who also felt the danger of a knife between the bed coverings had fled when she escaped.

But they reached the end of the corridor, and began ascending. Apollodorus grunted with the effort of heaving her up the stairs,

Neither soldier offered to help, thank the gods.

When they finally stopped, Cleopatra fought the anger that heated her blood. Her father's chambers? These were the rooms the Roman had chosen?

She forced the emotion down. Anger was not needed now. The moment called for something far more calculated.

One of the soldiers rapped on the door, was summoned forth, and they were inside the rooms. She inhaled, trying to fill herself with the courage of the great Ptolemaic line of rulers, of whom she was next.

A wry laugh rang out. "What is this? Deliveries in the night?"

"He says he has a gift for you, General Caesar. From the queen. He insisted on delivering it himself."

The air stilled, and she was certain she could feel Caesar's eyes on her.

"Make your delivery then, man," Caesar said. "It is late, and I am tired."

This is my moment. Everything changes now. A chill raised the hair on her arms.

Apollodorus lowered her carefully from his shoulder, and laid the roll of carpet on the floor. She took her last stale breath, even as she felt her servant slice at the cord that bound the carpet.

And then he began to unroll her shroud.

She rolled with it, feeling her hair wrap around her, feeling the carpet spin faster with her momentum. Coolness rushed in, then light--and she was free.

She pulled herself to sitting, leaned her head back, and looked into the eyes of Gaius Julius Caesar, Master of the Mediterranean.

The shock in his eyes was worth the effort. She let her mouth

curve into a slow smile and swept her hair behind her shoulders.

“What—what kind of goddess is this, delivered to my feet in the night?”

She remained at his feet a moment. He was fair and handsome, with a fastidiousness of appearance that pleased her. Cleopatra moved to her knees, then stood. She found that her height nearly matched his own, though he was tall. She stood before him, hands at her sides, palms damp. “I am Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt.”

He said nothing, only studied her hair, her face, her lips...then all of her.

He was lighter of skin than she expected. But the eyes, oh, the eyes were dark as basalt. His hair was beginning to thin, and in his vanity he combed it forward. Even in soldier’s dress he exuded a cultured elegance.

And then he laughed. Deep and rich. Not the nervous laugh of an interloper, nor the ingratiating laugh of a politician. The full and hearty laugh of a soldier, greatly amused by the woman who stood before him.

She said nothing, only lifted her chin and smiled into his eyes. He grew serious, and she felt something pass between them. Something heady. Dangerous.

“I requested audience with you and your brother tomorrow.” He took a step backward and retreated to the cedarwood desk her father kept at the side of his sumptuous room. He leaned over an unrolled scroll, as if too busy to deal with her.

She narrowed her eyes, preparing for battle.

“I am not foolish enough to walk into the palace in the daylight, with my enemy’s soldiers and supporters lining the streets.”

He looked up and nodded once. “Very well, you were perhaps

wise to be cautious. And you are here now.” He motioned to the soldiers. “Take her to a room and post a guard.” To her he said, “In the morning we will conduct our business.”

“In the morning my brother will fill your ears with lies and empty promises.” She shrugged. “But perhaps you do not care for the truth. I have heard that Romans are not very intelligent.”

Cleopatra thought she detected the hint of a smile, but then his brows furrowed as though she were a disrespectful child. *I am no child, Caesar.*

He propped his fists on the desk and leaned forward. “So you would try to fill my ears with your own lies first, I suppose. Before your brother has his chance?”

She licked her lips and eyed him through lowered lashes. “I seek only to help Caesar understand the situation. Egypt is a complicated land, and family squabbles can be difficult.” She pointed to an amphorae and cups on a side table, beside a window where gold silk window coverings billowed with the breezes from the sea. “A shared cup of wine, some small conversation, and then I will leave you to your sleep.”

Caesar straightened, then came from behind the desk to stand before her again. She could feel his breath on her, and lifted her eyes to face him fully.

He did not take his eyes from hers, but spoke to the guards. “Leave us. I will see to her myself.”

“General? She might intend harm—”

“Leave us!”

She heard the clink of armor retreating and half-turned her head to Apollodorus. “That is all. You have served me well this night. I will call for you soon.”

He bowed from the room and closed the door, and then they were alone.

Alone.

She turned back, unable to take her eyes from her jeweled sandals, her mouth suddenly dry.

He lifted her chin with his fingers, and her heart raced ahead of her, as though it knew that the battle had begun. She felt a flush begin at the base of her neck and sweep upward with a wave of heat. *Focus, Cleo. This is not part of the plan.*

“Now you are quiet? I send them away as you wished, and you have nothing more to say?”

“Wine,” she whispered. Anything to break the connection between them.

He half-smiled as though he could read her thoughts. “Of course.”

He moved away, and she exhaled and took a step backward, collecting herself.

Her father’s quarters were unchanged since she had left, with his varied tastes in Greek and Egyptian furnishings sprawled through the large front room, and extending back to his bed chamber, only dimly lit now by a small oil lamp on a two-drawer table beside the bed, still richly laid with red and gold coverings and boasting fat wooden posts, a true luxury in this desert land.

Caesar’s only change to the room seemed to be the addition of a large yet crude soldier’s chest. The sight of it reminded her that he was not a Greek. Not a philosopher, nor a scholar. He was a Roman savage, come to take her land if he could.

She looked around and made the quick decision to seat herself on one of the four red-cushioned couches that formed a square in the center

of the front room—her father’s approximation of the Greek’s *andrôn*, and his favorite place to host drinking parties.

She had only finished arranging herself and her robes upon the couch when Caesar was at her side, wine in hand. She accepted the cup. “Thank you,”

He lowered himself to the couch on her left, then reclined as she did, so that their heads drew close together in the corner. In the heart-beat of silence between them, she heard the scrape of soldiers outside the door, and knew that one shout from Caesar could mean her removal.

“Your men seem quite loyal,” she said, and sipped at the wine.

“A problem you are not plagued with, I hear.”

She smiled over the cup. “Only temporary. My brother’s advisors have spread poison in the city. I will soon persuade the people of the truth.”

“It is an astonishing city,” Caesar said, turning to the window opening. “I have never seen the like.”

“You have been here only two days. Wait until I have shown you all its wonders.”

He turned back to her with a tilt of his head, his only acknowledgment of her implied hospitality.

“But you came to speak of other matters.”

“I came to meet the man of whom I have heard great things.”

Caesar drank deeply from his cup, all the while studying her eyes. She felt in that moment that they were like two desert lions, circling the same antelope. Each one calculating the strengths and weaknesses of the other, always with an eye on the prize.

“Your father incurred a great debt,” Caesar said. “He received the support of Rome, recovered his kingdom. And still Rome has not seen

repayment. *That* is why I am here. It is time for Egypt to pay her debts.”

“And you think that my brother will pay?”

“I care little for the machinations of your murderous family.”

She drew back. It was true, the Ptolemies had a long history of killing off siblings and children who were rivals for the throne. But it was not generally spoken of.

“I only want my grain,” Caesar said.

“A strong Egypt will produce enough grain to feed herself and all of Rome. Our mother, the Nile, feeds us well. But Egypt will never be strong with my brother’s three fools ruling from behind the boy’s throne.”

“How old is your brother?”

“Thirteen. And still crying in the night for his mother.”

Caesar laughed. “And how old are you?”

She reached across and traced a line of gray at his temple. “Not as old as you.”

He gripped her fingers and held them there. “How old?” The words came out low, husky.

She stilled. “Twenty-one.”

He inhaled and looked away. “More than thirty years between us.”

She pulled her hand along his jaw line, until her open palm was beneath his lips. “I care not.”

He lowered his lips to her hand, then pushed her away and stood. “I will not release Egypt’s debt, even for a reward such as yourself.”

She sat upright on the couch and steeled her voice. “And I would not sell myself for all the grain in Egypt!”

Caesar reached a hand down to her hair and touched it. “What do you want from me then, Queen of Egypt?”

Cleopatra leaned away from his hand and stood. She crossed the

room, to the open window, aware that he watched her every movement.

Outside the window, Egypt's capital sprawled beneath them, its royal quarter overflowing with the succession of connected palaces built by the Ptolemies before her, alongside the Great Library, the Museum, amphitheatres and stadia.

Capital of the world.

Caesar came to stand behind her, close enough that his shoulder brushed her own.

"Have you been to see his tomb yet?" she asked.

"I have had urgent matters to tend. But I hope to soon pay him honor."

"Alexander the Great," she whispered. "He has lain in his crystal sarcophagus here for nearly three hundred years. We Ptolemies have ruled our part of his kingdom as best we could." The breeze surged, wrapping the silk draperies around the two of them, secreting them away.

She turned within the silk to Caesar, their bodies nearly touching. The warmth in her face returned. "But I fear the time of the Ptolemies is ending, and the time of the Romans is coming."

"Coming? I would say that we are already here."

"Will you rule an empire such as Alexander's alone, Caesar?"

"There are many in Rome who will share the burden."

"Ah--" she let her lips lift in a knowing smile--"but what do they offer you? Money? Loyalty? I can give you all that, and Egypt, too."

Caesar looked over her head to the glittering lights of the city. "You are so willing to give away your jewel?"

"Give away? Neither of us would find benefit in that. But with me by your side, Caesar... We could unite two kingdoms and then move forward together, across the east and to the west, until our boundaries

would push past even those of Alexander's." The light of conquest leaped into his eyes. She saw it, measured its intensity, and was pleased. "Caesar and Cleopatra." She pressed fingertips against the tunic that showed above his mail. "The world has never seen the like."

Caesar lifted her other hand to his chest and gripped both of them there, his black eyes invading her spirit. The triumph she felt a moment before gave way to something else--and fear pounded through her when she recognized it.

In her battle for control of Egypt, she had made the choice to use the only weapon that her brother did not have—her femininity. But would that choice also be her downfall? *I had not counted on my heart interfering with my will.* He was an attractive man, it was true. But there was something more. All her life Cleopatra had been surrounded by power-grasping family and those that hung onto their robes. And her lust for power, she knew, was as great as any. But each was weak in his own way. Too weak to do whatever necessary to rule a wild and mysterious people such as the Egyptians. No Ptolemy before her had learned their languages, their religion, their customs the way she had. And still she filled her mind with Greek philosophy and mathematics, astronomy and medicine. All of it had distilled, she knew, into a formidable intelligence and a ruthless will. Never had she met another who matched her intellect, her warring spirit, her hunger to rule.

Until tonight.

He still looked down into her eyes, and she saw that he felt it too.

"You are not a child," he said, as if to convince himself.

"Not for a long time."

He drew her fingers to his lips. "Caesar and Cleopatra." He murmured the words against her hands. "The world has never seen the like."

Heady victory swept her. She had won. Obtained the support of the one man who could restore her kingdom. The tension in her shoulders eased. But as he bent his lips to her own and she gave herself willingly to him, a whisper of dread played about, warning her that this was a dangerous game.

In aligning herself with Caesar and Rome, she might lose everything.