

## Alexandria, Egypt, August 1, 30 BC

Across the immense harbour, the feluccas were returning with the day's catch, their small black silhouettes emerging from the shimmering haze into the amber hue of the late afternoon like a flotilla of ghost-ships, the sea around them scattered with solar jewels flaring and glinting on the rippled surface. Like dragonflies, the feluccas darted swiftly this way and that, their single sails bringing the winds easily to their command.

Octavius watched the nimble flotilla of little ships whipping through the water in the busy harbour, nipping between the huge grain ships anchored in the bay, waiting to be loaded and sent back to feed the incessant hunger of Rome. They passed dexterously between the creaky old dahabeah, the cargo ships of the Nile that had entered the harbour from the canal, laden with plunder.

He could smell the sea carried on the warm breeze blowing in from the bay, fresh and pleasant in his face and through his short cropped hair. He was still intoxicated on the fruits of victory and had an air of arrogance about him as he looked over to Agrippa's fleet anchored in the harbour beneath the majestic structures along Cape Lochias. His eyes followed the sea walls and the impressive fortifications upon them. They did Egypt no good in the end; in fact, they proved to be of no tactical advantage whatsoever. Octavius took the city by land in a broad pincer from which Antonius could not escape.

Overawed by his own success, was Faustus' thought as he wiped the sweat from his grimy face with the back of his hand, dust and desert sand abrading his skin like needles. His tongue squeezed between his dry cracked lips and swept from left to right, the cracked skin like a jagged shard across his tongue. I need a drink, he thought, stifling under the blazing sun beating down its oppressive heat, roasting him alive inside his cuirass like a joint of meat. This is how Icarus must have felt when he flew too close to the sun – too close to exalted power. It was excruciatingly uncomfortable.

There's something inhuman about Octavius, he thought, being perfectly comfortable out here under that scorching sun. Forged in Vulcan's workshop like his uncle, he thought, then withdrew the thought at once, considering Octavius's usual sickly disposition, he hardly felt Vulcan's workshop an appropriate comparison. The constitution of a lizard perhaps, if he might make so bold as to ponder the thought of scaly flesh under all that unblemished armour. Army life never did agree with Octavius, it was merely the means to the end, and now that end had been reached. Only Octavius was left standing, all his enemies vanquished. He was more than a general now – he was the most powerful man on the earth. The sickly and somewhat insipid boy had blossomed to the point of deification... 'We've come a long way since Velitrae,' he said invoking the name of their home town in the Alban Hills, where they had been boys together.

Octavius felt the tug of his ancestors and recalled the processions and festivals of Jupiter Latiaris at his hilltop sanctuary, where his mother Atia Balba Caesonia, niece of the great Julius Caesar, once told him that on the night he was born, Jupiter's burning finger arced across the heavens over the sanctuary, auguring that a great destiny was written for him in the heavens, and one day he would rule the world. Here he stood, prophesy fulfilled.

He could hear her now, calling him from the afterlife, telling him that this is just the beginning. He blinked and her voice was gone. He looked at Faustus. 'Happy days, Faustus.'

'The *happiest* of days,' Faustus replied as he looked out across the bay, supplanting the heaving sea beyond with the rolling hills of home, lush with olive groves and vineyards climbing into the distant haze veiled mountains. 'I think I shall go home,' he said wistfully, 'and have an idle summer on my estate. Get drunk every night on decent wine and ravage my slaves until my *pippina* drops off...'

The four men chuckled lowly.

'I'm afraid you'll have to wait a little longer before you see Velitrae again, Faustus. We both shall...' And in a low homesick tone Octavius added: 'We'll ride home together, like we did as boys, do you remember?'

Agrippa and Calvinus looked at one another.

'Such melancholy,' said Agrippa. 'Riding into Rome at the head of your victory triumph with the riches of Asia and Egypt following behind you will be the happiest of days...' He glanced at Calvinus.

'Firstly we must consolidate our power, Agrippa,' Octavius said as he walked towards the edge of the terrace, watching another dark shape metamorphose from the shimmering obscurity into a solid form just beyond Pharos Island, approaching the peninsular from the open sea and slipping quietly towards the harbour mouth – an Italian cargo ship, her broad white sails bloated with the wind.

It was an indescribable feeling, elation, joy, power, disbelief, and *dread*. It was as if he were walking in another man's caligae, experiencing another man's life, and for a moment, he wondered if he might be dreaming, because he had dreamt of this day every night for the past fourteen years and had experienced it in a thousand scenarios. Antonius' suicide had denied him the pleasure of seeing him paraded with his queen through Rome in chains – but it was a pleasure worth forfeiture in the cold reality of the here and now, and when he thought about it, he decided it was the best thing for expedience sake. Taking Antonius back to Rome alive, even in chains would have been a risk – but then, it had never really been an option. Nobody was in any doubt that Marcus Antonius would never have allowed himself to be taken alive.

And as if reading his mind, Agrippa said: 'Tomorrow, the sun will rise on a new era, Caesar. You have changed the world forever.'

Octavius looked at his three companions, Agrippa, Calvinus and Faustus. At length he said, 'For the first time in a hundred years, Rome is at peace with

herself. But now is not the time for complacency. In fact, now, more than ever, we must be vigilant in what we must do and there's still much to be done. There are still Antonians out there, and they're single-minded now more than ever,' he warned. 'Now Antonius is more than a mortal man, he's even more dangerous to the Republic.'

There was a long silence.

Faustus fiddled absentmindedly with the pommel of his sword, rubbing the aquila's head with his thumb, stretching his sore lips across his teeth, feeling the skin pulling apart like opening fissures. 'Rome is there for the taking,' he said looking out to sea. 'You have the loyalty of the legions; no one will dare oppose you.'

Octavius shook his head. 'No, Faustus. That's not the way. I'll return to Rome as her saviour, not her conqueror. As the man who preserved the Senate and saved the Republic from madness and endless civil war, not the man who subdued and destroyed it. The people must love me, not despise me.

'Under my guidance,' he went on, watching the Roman merchant ship coming into the harbour's broad expanse, 'the Empire will flourish as none that have come before it. I have given Rome the greatest victory in her history and ended a hundred years of civil wars. I command legions that Alexander the Great would have envied. I do not have to use threats or force, gentlemen. They will give me everything I want, because only *I* can bring lasting peace.'

Calvinus gave him a cautionary look. 'Then I urge you, Octavius, do not make the same mistakes your father made before you by allowing your enemies to live, or you bear your throat to your assassins,' he warned ominously.

Octavius looked reassuringly at him. 'Rest assured, old friend, by the time *I'm* done, it will be *they* who bear *their* throats to *me*. And I will strike ruthlessly and without favour or prejudice, any who plot against the good of Rome. My mercy does not come without a price.'

Calvinus fanned himself with his hand to no effect. Any breeze that did render them relief from the heat was as brief as a dying gasp. 'They bear watching, Octavius. And all the while the Antonian renegades are on the loose, your position is threatened. As you said yourself, Antonius's name now holds the divinity and mysticism of a god.'

Octavius wasn't going to let a dead man usurp his destiny, as he tirelessly tried to in life. He had to see his vision through decisively, no matter where it might take him – even if it was to the point of an assassin's dagger. 'We must make certain our enemies are either in chains or dead,' he said looking at Calvinus.

Conversation returned to consolidating Asia Minor and how to deal with the Senate back home.

With care, was Calvinus' thought.

Octavius was now patronus of Egypt, claimed as his personal spoil of war, giving him de facto control of all Egypt as a man has over his own slaves and estates. Not only did he control the legions and the navy, he also controlled the grain that Rome desperately needed, and that gave him an edge when it came to dealing with the Senate. Antonius and Cleopatra had already demonstrated the consequences to Rome when the grain ships from Egypt no longer sail into Italian ports. Starvation and angry mobs. The revenue and grain would be vital assets in securing his position.

Every victorious general name's his own terms, and his terms were simple – he wanted to control the Empire and to Romanise the world. He wanted to build a legacy that would endure forever. He wanted to control the Senate rather than destroy it, through the Senate he could enjoy legitimacy and the Republic would be the veil that hides his throne. He wanted *imperium maius*, supreme command of all Roman forces and oversight of Rome's foreign affairs and provinces. He could risk everything in a single gambit and seize power by force as Faustus and Agrippa urged him to, and, for a while at least, it would probably work, but he knew the Roman heart would soon sour and plot against him as it does all tyrants. The Patient way was what was needed now, and that required a strong nerve. 'Now we must battle in the Senate with words and deeds,' he said. 'And we must win the heart of Rome. The citizens all.'

'You already have their hearts, Caesar,' said Agrippa. 'And when they see the grain ships, you'll have their souls too.'

'And I intend to keep them by loving them back,' Octavius responded. 'We must return as Romans delivering victory to the Senate and the People of Rome in humble humility. We must return as benevolent heroes who have destroyed a deadly enemy. There will be no legions crossing the Rubicon this time.'

Faustus and Agrippa exchanged a worried look, men of war cowed by a politician wearing a general's garb.

Calvinus was much older than the others – a hero of Pharsalus, where Pompeius was soundly defeated by Caesar's numerically inferior, but tactically superior forces eighteen years ago. He was a son of the Domitii, an old and influential family of the ordo patricius, and one of Octavius' most trusted advisers and closest friends.

Calvinus had immediately declared his loyalty to Octavius upon Julius Caesar's murder and assigned his best legionaries to protect Caesar's adopted son in those first turbulent days after Caesar's murder.

'At least let me take the fleet back to Italy.'

'No, Agrippa,' Octavius said sharply. 'We must do nothing provocative. You're a soldier and you think like a soldier. Now is the time to think like a politician. There's no need for demonstrations of our military power, they know it already. Now we must show a different sort of strength by going among our enemies in friendship and reconciliation.'

'They're snakes,' said Faustus.

Octavius looked at him. 'Then we will dine with snakes, Faustus, and we will smile at them and flatter them, and if they try to bite us, we'll cut off their heads.'