

# CLEOPATRA AFTER LIFE

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## 1. THE SUICIDE

Blood—still warm—poured down her ample bosom, flooding the airy fabric of her white dress so that it clung to her every curve like a second skin turned inside out. She felt it drip from her sagging hem and pool between her toes. Iras did not ask from whence the blood came. It was not her place to ask. She hoped only that it had been drained from some animal and not slave, such as she. Her own blood would one day be drained into such a bowl so that she might be mummified along with the palace donkeys.

No words needed speaking—she already had her instructions and all she knew was how to obey—Iras began to walk with purpose through the marble antechamber toward the pillared archway at its other end, yet immediately had to slow her pace so as to avoid slipping and sliding around in her blood-soaked sandals.

No guards flanked the massive doors, as there should have been. Iras felt irked anew that she and Charmion seemed the only two palace slaves still doing any work.

The sound of muted music and muffled moaning amplified as she approached. She did not waver, though she felt a strong sense of foreboding at the thought of what awaited her across the vast throne room within—Iras cracked open the doors and slipped inside.

The stench of stale sweat, fresh sex, and soured wine nearly halted her. Yet Iras knew she could not stop moving, for if she stopped moving, she might start thinking, and if she started thinking, she might think herself into a statue of stone as solid as the walls of this mausoleum in which they ironically hid from those that would send them to the afterlife.

Iras pushed her way through the half-naked slaves as they fed each other food and wine in a pleased frenzy. No one noticed her—the unknown hands that groped her were indiscriminate in their grasp—no one ever did.

She gasped for air as she broke free of the throng of bodies the other end of the room. Iras clasped her hands and bowed her head straightaway, “Lord Antonius.”

Marcus Antonius, fifty years of drinking, fighting, and fucking tarnishing his bronzed visage, sat on a throne wearing the robes of an Egyptian King and a five-day beard. Beside him, an empty matching

throne.

Antonius did not look up as he grabbed a hunk of meat from the table before him, opened his already full mouth, and ripped in.

“About time. It’s just like Cleo to take all the slaves with her to piss,” he chewed. Antonius swallowed the greasy meat down with great gulps of wine until his glass was drained, held out his cup with one hand—“To the brim”—and continued to stuff food into his mouth with the other.

“Your Lord Antonius, I—” Iras began.

“In victory you deserve wine, in defeat you need it, so pour me my *futuo* glass.”

“But your Lord—”

“I said wine!” he bellowed.

The pulsating and gyrating slaves didn’t miss a beat. Marcus Antonius yelled when he was drunk. He was more often drunk than not these last weeks.

*A man who whispers will receive more attention than one whose tantrums deafen ears*, Iras had heard her queen council him. But Marcus Antonius was a man who only took council when his pride was appeased with platitudes.

Antonius finally bothered himself to look and see which of Cleopatra’s slaves he could demand she have lashed when she returned.

“Why are you covered in blood?” and then, “Where’s Cleo?”

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Queen Cleopatra VII Philopator, sharp in features as she was in wit, who wore her crown rather than it wearing her, who commanded an army but could disarm any adversary with a mere caress, who spoke eight languages, was mother to five children, and lover of the most powerful men in the known world, strained to hear through the wall against which her ear was pressed.

She was a queen not unaccustomed to listening through walls.

Though nearly twenty harvests had passed since her own brother, her own first husband, had usurped her, she still remembered how thirsty the draught of power had left her. She hadn’t listened through walls then, so she hadn’t heard the betrayal coming until it was breaking down her door in the middle of the night. She *had*, through cunning, wit, and fortune granted by the Gods, dethroned her greedy little brother and reclaimed her power, but the memory was still sharp as the fangs of a viper. And so, even though she was a queen—*especially because she was a queen*—she listened. But barely a muffled drumbeat made it through.

If only she had not imported such fine marble with which to build her mausoleum.

No one but her two closest slaves knew of this habit. Charmion who stood beside her in the throne room antechamber, still holding shakily onto the blood-coated basin, and Iras who wearing that blood, should by now should be telling Antonius that his queen was dead.

Iras was pleasant enough to view, though her figure was too full, her height too short, her face too round, her brow too often furrowed.

It was Charmion who held a resemblance to the queen that Cleopatra had selected her specifically for. Tall and slender, broad shoulders, high cheekbones, deep set eyes and a nose like the curved beak of a falcon. In the proper royal attire and painted face, the slave could pass as a decoy should Cleopatra ever need a diversion. The resemblance was noticeable even in the way that they both flinched as glass suddenly shattered against the other side of the wall to which their ears were pressed.

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Red wine dripped down the stone throne room wall and onto the shards of glass. The dancers stood frozen, mid-pleasure, staring at Marcus Antonius. Only Iras averted her gaze. *The only sensible one among buffoons*, she thought.

“What are you looking at? Just because your queen is dead doesn’t mean you can’t still eat her food! Just because our every last ship sank to the bottom of the ocean doesn’t mean you can’t still drink her wine! Hades, just because she abandoned me to be captured doesn’t mean you can’t still dance on her grave!”

The dancers whispered amongst each other. *Was their divine queen really returned to the Netherworld? Were they next?*

Iras had seen Lord Antonius rage before, but her queen had always been there to soothe his temper and distract him with amusing diversions or pleasures of the flesh. She had heard him say time and again that Cleopatra should strike her slaves to remind them who they were owned by, even if they had not given her reason to. He said this with Iras standing not an arm’s-length away. As if she were invisible.

She wished she were invisible now. She feared how his rage might turn from these witless slaves towards her.

“Come on! Dance, baboons, dance!” The music hesitated—a few solitary notes, a single drumbeat—“I said *dance*. I am your King!” As the music obeyed, so did the dancers, slowly picking up where they left off.

Head bowed, making herself as small and insignificant as possible, Iras began to slowly slide herself backwards through the mass, avoiding any stray hands that might grope her back to the throne.

A sudden, resounding *BOOM!* reverberated throughout the palace as if Osiris, God of the Netherworld, himself were knocking on the mausoleum door.

Mass panic ensued.

Iras was forced to climb onto the forbidden throne dais to avoid being trampled.

From high, she surveyed the scene: slaves slipping on wine and bodily fluids, bodies clinging to bodies, dragging— pulling— clambering— desperately towards the room's only exit. Where they thought they were escaping to, Iras could not suppose; this monumental coffin had only one exit and a legion of Romans on the other side of it...