

I



LAST STAND IN ALEXANDRIA

Death in Egypt. It was not an end the men of the 6th Legion or those of the 28th Legion would have imagined for themselves or their general, Julius Caesar, when they set foot here in Alexandria at the beginning of October 48 B.C. This was only meant to be a brief stopover, after all. Now, months later, as the legionaries filed through the darkness of night into the half-moon theater of the royal palace of the Ptolemies close to Alexandria's docks, and crowded toward the front to hear Caesar speak, many of them were afraid. Some were on the verge of panic.

Back in August, Caesar had been the victor in a battle that had given him control of much of the Roman world. An army of tens of thousands of men served him. But here, now, Caesar commanded little more than three thousand legionaries and several hundred cavalry, and he was surrounded and cut off in the Egyptian capital by as many as seventy thousand well-equipped Egyptian troops.

To many members of his little force, Caesar's cause looked lost, and their future bleak. He had ignored their requests to lead them out of Alexandria. Why, they didn't know. He had lingered here until the Egyptians had sealed them all inside the city. They were surrounded by determined Egyptian regulars and militia who consistently tried to dislodge them from their fortified positions in fierce assaults and brutal street fighting. Caesar's orders to commanders he'd left behind in Greece and Syria to urgently send him reinforcements seemed to have gone unheeded, his requests for help from the minor potentates of the Middle East had apparently been ignored.

Arguments had begun to break out among Caesar's rank and file. Some men said that he had lied to them when he had recently said he would soon give the order to break out of this fatal place. Others took Caesar's

part, saying that it would be impossible to break out without the enemy getting wind of their intentions and setting an ambush for them, because townspeople trapped in the Romans' sector of Alexandria would see what they were up to and covertly alert the besiegers. But those who had lost their courage and their faith in Caesar outnumbered those who defended him.

It seemed to many of Caesar's troops that they were doomed to perish here, forgotten and forsaken by their countrymen. No reinforcements had reached them. Their food was almost exhausted. But worse, they had that morning discovered that their water supply, precarious at the best of times, had been poisoned by the Egyptians. Certainly it was winter here now, and the locals had told them they could soon expect thunderstorms that would bring rain, and even hail. But a man without water can last only a matter of days. The Romans could all be dead from thirst before the first winter storms brought rainwater sluicing down from the stone-clad rooftops of the city.

The warships that had brought them here were still at anchor in the harbor. Why couldn't they make a sudden dash from the sector of the city they held, force their way to the docks, and board the waiting ships and make good their escape? It seemed a simple enough solution to simple soldiers.

When the panicky clamor from his troops, led by his younger, inexperienced Italian legionaries of the 28th—mostly mere boys in their teens and twenties—had that morning begun to sound threateningly like the first stages of mutiny, Caesar had quickly called this assembly. Caesar had seen more than enough mutinies of late. The previous year he had punished the 9th Legion at Piacenza in northern Italy by decimation for refusing to obey the orders of his deputy Mark Antony. And he wouldn't be here with so pitifully few troops if it hadn't been for a massive strike by all his best legions in Greece this past August. It was time to put his famed oratorical powers to use, to dampen fears, to embolden faint hearts.

Yet not all the legionaries assembling in the low light of spluttering torches and spreading on the stone tiers of the theater were anxious or fearful. While the youngsters of the 28th talked incessantly among themselves, repeating the sentiment now prevalent in their ranks that they must escape Alexandria to survive, most of the older soldiers of the 6th Legion, less than a thousand men in their thirties and forties, quietly, calmly took their places.

These men of the 6th were tough, vastly experienced veteran soldiers. Recruited in eastern Spain seventeen years before by Pompey the Great, they had subdued the Celtic natives of Portugal and western Spain, they

had been commanded by Caesar for two years during his conquest of Gaul, they had fought in the major conflicts of the civil war. These men of the 6th had stared death in the face for almost two decades. Over the years they had seen a third of their comrades die, as they stormed villages and towns and fought set piece battles across western Europe. They had starved and gone without water before now, too.

Folding their arms, swarthy, battle-scarred Spanish veterans of the 6th such as Publius Sertorius, his brother Marcus, and their good friends the brothers Quintus and Gaius Tetarfenus would have studied the overtalkative, edgy youths of the 28th Legion with distaste. Made arrogant by their experience of war and by the special trust that Caesar had placed in them of late, the legionaries of the 6th stood aloof from these foolish, frightened Italian boys. "Make way for your betters," they would have said as they came to the assembly at the theater.

Some of Caesar's cavalry troopers also would have been looking and sounding alarmed—men who had been among the seven hundred Gallic cavalry that Caesar had taken into battle in Greece against Pompey. Two hundred of their number had died in the Battle of Pharsalus. The five hundred survivors, here, now, were conscious that they were a long way from their homeland in France. None had ever been so far from home before. This hot, dry place was alien to them, and worse, they had been forced to dismount and fight as foot soldiers in the streets of Alexandria; this wasn't what their elders had told them to expect when they signed up with Julius Caesar.

These troopers, all wearing breeches—unlike the Romans, who wore tunics to their knees but no trousers—were cavalrymen, the best horsemen in Europe, not infantry. They were neither equipped nor trained for close-quarters fighting on foot. Since boyhood they had practiced launching lances and darts at the gallop at enemy infantry, to wield their large cavalry sword, the *spatha*, from horseback, slicing off heads as if they were cutting chaff. Their round shields were small, their leather vests only light, unlike the Roman legionaries they fought alongside, whose shields were almost as big as they were, their chain mail armor thick, and their training designed around close combat with their short swords.

Other troopers would have appeared more stoic and less troubled—the three hundred long-haired, bearded Germans of Caesar's bodyguard—tall, broad-shouldered, and fiercely brave Batavians from modern-day Holland and Treverans from the Moselle River. These Germans, most of them fair of hair, some redheaded, none of them Roman citizens, had served as Caesar's personal bodyguards for a decade. Rating them the best cavalry he had ever seen, Caesar paid them well, and in return their loyalty was to

him, and to him alone. Never once had they questioned his orders or let him down. That attitude would not change here at Alexandria; the Germans had blind faith in Caesar. If only that faith was shared by his own countrymen of the 28th Legion.

Not all the troops were here. Some were on guard duty, at the walls and guard towers of the fortifications they had built around their sector of the city, a sector centered on the theater, which Caesar had turned into a citadel. Other troops were guarding four special prisoners, surviving members of the Egyptian royal family, who had been kidnapped by the men of the 6th and their colleagues and held here with the Romans. Chief among them was fourteen-year-old Ptolemy XIII, king of Egypt. With him were his youngest sister, the fifteen-year-old Arsinoe; his little brother, another Ptolemy; and the elder sister who had until recently shared the throne with him as queen of Egypt until he had deposed her—the enigmatic twenty-one-year-old Cleopatra VII.

There was movement in the wings of the tall back stone wall of the theater; a curtain covering a doorway parted, and Julius Caesar was walking out onto the stage in front of his troops, bareheaded, in his armor, with his rich scarlet general's cloak, the *paludamentum*, flowing behind him. He was not tall, nor was he handsome, possessing a long nose and balding pate. Yet there was something magnetic about Gaius Julius Caesar.

"Hail, Commander!" came the characteristic greeting of three thousand chorused voices, led by their officers. Expectantly, and in some cases nervously, Caesar's men stood on the tiers of the theater before him in full equipment, with their helmets under their arms. And then they lapsed into silence as they watched their general reach the front of the stage. He stood there for a moment, his long, serious face lit by torches burning in a row along the front of the stage.

"Comrades," Caesar began. Unlike other Roman generals, who addressed their men simply as "Soldiers," Caesar would often refer to his rank and file as his fellow soldiers or comrades in arms when he spoke to them. Caesar's contemporary, the great Roman orator Marcus Cicero, wrote to a friend, "Do you know any man who, even if he has concentrated on the art or oratory to the exclusion of all else, can speak better than Caesar?" The speaking style Caesar used was grand and noble. Sometimes he was wonderfully witty, and he displayed a varied yet exact vocabulary. He'd even written a book on the subject of public speaking and the appropriate use of words. Yet, when he spoke to his troops, he spared his men the rhetorical flourishes that impressed the likes of Cicero.

With a staff officer noting down his words, Caesar spoke to the hushed theater, characteristically pitching his voice high so that all could hear

him. Impatient by nature, he was never one to beat about the bush. Coming straight to the point, he immediately addressed the problem at hand, the lack of freshwater, by reasoning with his men.

“Comrades, if you dig wells, freshwater will be found. Every coastal district naturally has veins of freshwater.” It sounded like such an easy solution. Besides, Caesar went on, even if the Egyptian coast turned out to be different from every other coastline in the world and devoid of freshwater, the Romans could still send their small fleet to fetch water farther to the east or west. The way Caesar spoke, water was only a minor problem.

“As for flight,” he went on, sounding more like a friendly adviser than a commander, “that is out of the question. Not merely for those for whom their reputation comes first, but even for those who think of nothing but their lives. It’s only with great effort that we’ve beaten back the onslaughts of the enemy on our fortifications. If we abandon those fortifications, we will be no match for the enemy either in numbers or in position. Besides, embarkation, especially from small boats, involves difficulty and delay, while the Alexandrians have on their side extreme speed and familiarity with the areas and the buildings.” Made insolent by their successes so far, Caesar said, the Egyptians would react quickly and lethally to any attempt at a mass breakout to the sea by the Romans. “They would dash ahead seizing the higher ground and the buildings, and so prevent you from withdrawing and reaching the ships.”

Murmurs of agreement ran through the assembled soldiers. Heads among the ranks of the 6th Legion were nodding. Many legionaries could now picture themselves being cut to pieces in the open by the vastly more numerical enemy troops as they made a headlong dash for the harbor, or on the harbor itself as the Egyptians flooded onto it in small boats, as they had previously. What Caesar said made sense.

Caesar could sense a mood change. “So you should put that idea out of your heads.” His voice became less friendly, more steely. “Concentrate on conquering. At all costs!”

Caesar now prepared to give an order to his centurions, an order that went against the mood prevailing in this theater when he had strode onto the stage. If that order was not obeyed by the rank and file, his power of command would be at an end; many of his troops would disregard their officers and try to escape from Alexandria any way they could, or surrender. With the inevitable result that the Egyptians would overrun Caesar’s positions and he would be a dead man. “Centurions . . .” He paused, looking around the assembly and catching the eye of his centurions, all men he knew by name. “You are to cease all current operations.”

Julius Caesar had a new operation for them all.