

## 2 – Cleo – Alexandria, Egypt

Cleo's kohl-shaded eyes flashed with impatience. Marc Antony was in another of his depressed moods. He looked not at all like the bold legionnaire who'd conquered lands and promised her an empire.

Marc groaned, upended his wine glass, and slumped back into that pose that so infuriated her, elbows braced against her table, hands supporting his un-shaven chin. She poked his shoulder with one red-tinted fingernail. His cleft chin slid off his palm and his head hit the table nose first. He grumbled, "Bring me more wine."

"Now is no time for drink." She herself desperately wished for a pitcher of the fermented grape juice to transform her world into blissful oblivion. "We must make a plan." Cleo pushed aside her drinking cup encrusted with the amethysts many believed prevented intoxication. She knew better.

Marc groaned. "All is lost. Octavian's army is to the east. And Cornelius Gallus on the western border." He raised up. "Wait! We can escape to India."

Cleo shook her head. Marc made no sense. She'd have to devise her own plan.

He slumped, then rose again. "I thought you loaded your ships onto rollers to sail them across the desert." He waved his arms, pointing east, then west.

"Octavian's allies burned my ships." She rolled her eyes. He was useless.

"What about our families?" He scratched his cheek. "Certainly they will help. My sweet daughter Fulvia Antonius loves me." His face softened into a dreamy grin. "She favors me so."

"Fulvia is but sixteen. An ambitious girl who fancies herself more legionnaire than Roman maiden. Remember, her mother died bereft at losing you." In Rome Cleo had seen the hatred in that daughter's yellow eyes. "She would as leave slay me and carry you back to Rome. Once you mentioned an ancient Roman ancestor on her mother's side. Perhaps Fulvia has inherited werewolf talents? Some Roman families trace their lineage back to the pups of Romulus."

He shook off her words with a head shake strong enough to bounce his curls.

Cleo hated it when Marc fell back into Roman thinking, unable to speak badly of noble families. "Your Roman families are allied with Octavian. My incestuous family would rather kill each other than battle other enemies." Except Alex. Kind, gentle Alexandria would never harm a soul.

“Your sister Alexandria! Of course. We could hide out in her library until we obtain a ship to take us to some sumptuous port.”

“I will not involve Alex in this mess. I haven’t seen her since she and I last visited the Sphinx. My beloved librarian sister will never leave the safety of her library. She’s shy. The world has forgotten she’s a Ptolemy. I refuse to endanger her life.”

“We could flee and find a villa in Greece or a house along the Nile. Just live quietly.”

Cleo’s kohled eyes looked to the ceiling. “You are such a dreamer. It’s too late for that.”

“The only answer for a noble Roman is to fall on his sword.” Marc stumbled to his feet, shouted, “Where’s my sword?” then crumpled onto an ebony chair.

Cleo shook her head at his snoring form. Useless. “Like Julius? He fell on someone else’s sword. Fifteen times.”

Why couldn’t her life be like that last trip with Alex to the Blue Lotus Oasis? She remembered that perfect day. Before she stepped from the chariot into their purple silk tent servants had cleared the area of snakes. As the sun slid below the desert horizon, the sisters bathed in a sun-warmed pool, sipped wine and feasted on dates and figs steeped in cinnamon honey. She plucked ten of the blue lotus blossoms, each the size of her palm, and tossed the mauve flowers to a servant, with an order to boil them into a strong tea. Cleo denied she craved the flower’s power. She claimed only to enjoy their relaxing euphoria. But right now she would give a kingdom for the strong lotus tea to take her to oblivion.

Distracted from her musing by the waft of sweet perfume, she looked up. A tall, graceful form stood in the doorway, elegant as any noble woman—if a noble woman wore the head of a cat. Alert ears, broad smooth nose, gentle eyes with long alluring lashes, and a face overlaid with golden fur.

“Bastet, whatever are you doing here? You’ve certainly not come to catch mice or cobras.”

The goddess’s golden cat eyes flashed. “You have neglected my temple, so I came to you.”

“I have no time to worship at every temple in Alexandria. Haven’t you heard I may lose my kingdom?”

“The streets are filled with talk of nothing else.” Bastet’s fingers stroked her wide

gold and lapis collar.

“Then leave me alone.”

“I am the daughter of Isis and Ra, sister to Apollo,” the cat goddess purred. “I protect women and children.”

“Have you come to protect me and my children? You owe me that.”

Bastet’s velvet cheeks sagged and her eyes narrowed. “I brought you love, fertility, and joy for many years. You were never grateful. Your children now face danger beyond my powers. I am no longer the great lion goddess of Lower Egypt.”

Cleo snapped back, “I attended all your feasts of drunkenness. I purchased prodigious amounts of wine to honor you. Now Romans prepare to crush me. You must save me.”

“You angered Rome by taking their men and flaunting your kingdom’s riches. Now they want all you have. No one stands with you. All have deserted you.”

Sometimes Cleo hated these insolent Egyptian gods. “My sister...”

“Your sister is safe. That is all I came to tell you. Now I travel out of Alexandria with my dear Anubis. We will stay with Sebek and Tuareret in their river palace until Egypt is at peace again.”

As Bastet turned and stalked out of the chamber, Cleo called after the cat, “You go with the dog to play with the crocodile and hippo? You have all deserted me.” Her gaze returned to the sleeping Marc. She had an escape plan up her imperial sleeve.

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**An excerpt from “[The Pharaoh and the Librarian](#)” by Amber Polo.**

What if Cleopatra faked her death and escaped on a pirate ship? While her sister sailed for Wales with the most valuable ancient books from her Library of Alexandria? And they both landed in an imagined new world filled with crypto-creatures and historical humans?

Trekking the desert of 1<sup>st</sup> century New Mexico, Cleo from the Yucatan and Alex from Nova Scotia, they’d need bravery and help from friends and lovers to evade inner demons and determined villains across an uncharted wilderness filled with crypto-creatures and historical humans.

Amber Polo, constantly asking “What if...?” has a hard time writing in one genre at a time. Best known for *The Shapeshifters’ Library* series which asked what if librarian dog-shifters faced book-burning werewolves, she shares her love of libraries and fascination with creatures and places, real and not-so-real in [The Pharaoh and the Librarian](#). [www.amberpolo.com](http://www.amberpolo.com)