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ANCIENT LOVE STORIES

*The Most Remarkable
Romances in History*

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This was the final resting place of the Sacred Band of Thebes: one of the most remarkable and most loyal armies that had ever lived. A bold experiment in an age torn apart by unending wars and broken alliances, who had died fighting for the freedom of the Greeks. An army, not just of soldiers, but of a hundred and fifty male lovers.

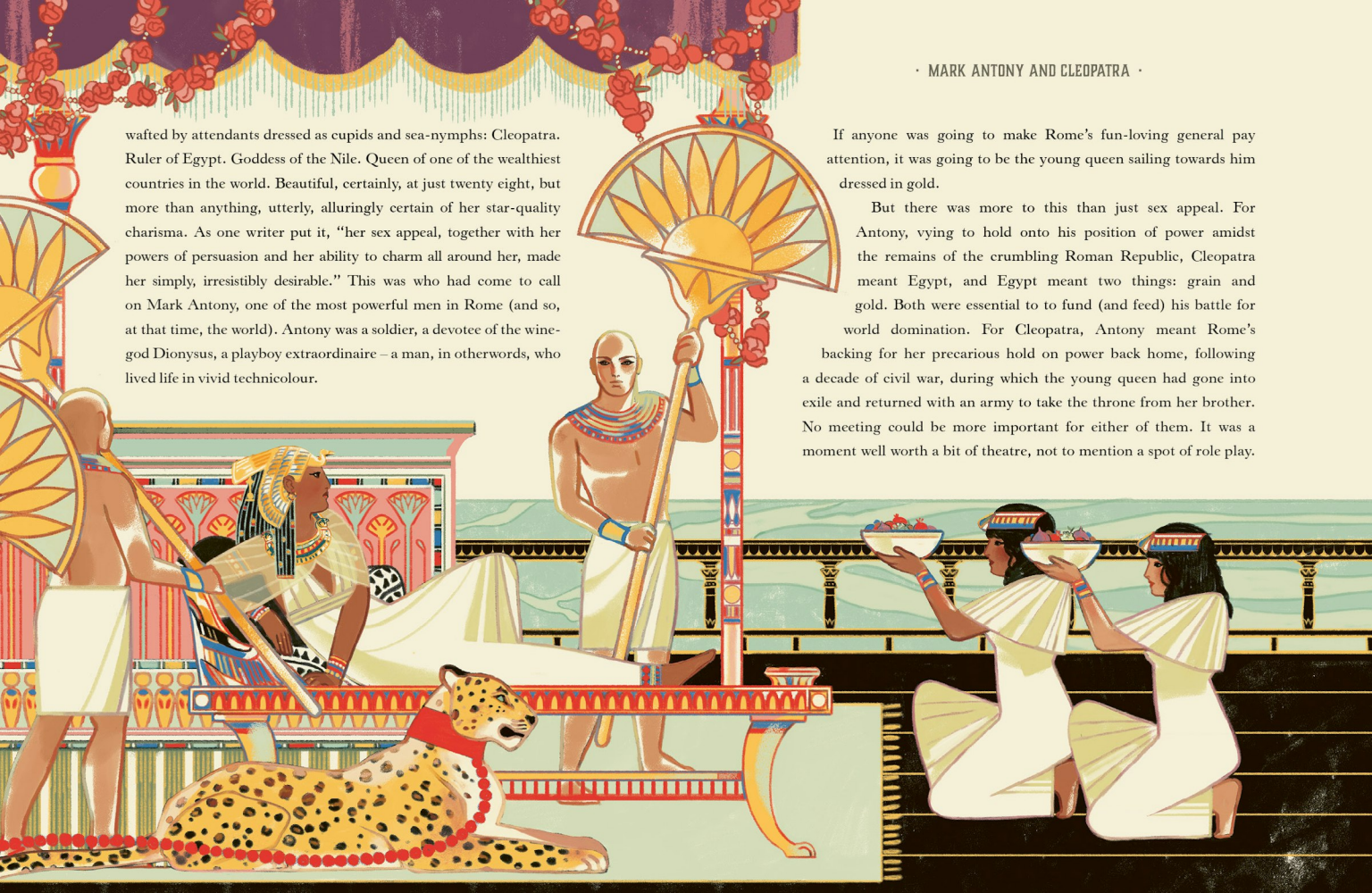
Bound together by fierce loyalty to each other, this crack team of warriors was founded in Thebes in 379 BCE by an enterprising visionary by the name of Pammenes. It began as a resistance corps against the looming military power of Sparta (renowned the world over for its rigorously-trained soldiers) across the mainland to the south. These were shadowy, quarrelsome years, splattering blood across the pages of history, and well suited to the birth of a new kind of army.



wafted by attendants dressed as cupids and sea-nymphs: Cleopatra. Ruler of Egypt. Goddess of the Nile. Queen of one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Beautiful, certainly, at just twenty eight, but more than anything, utterly, alluringly certain of her star-quality charisma. As one writer put it, "her sex appeal, together with her powers of persuasion and her ability to charm all around her, made her simply, irresistibly desirable." This was who had come to call on Mark Antony, one of the most powerful men in Rome (and so, at that time, the world). Antony was a soldier, a devotee of the wine-god Dionysus, a playboy extraordinaire – a man, in other words, who lived life in vivid technicolour.

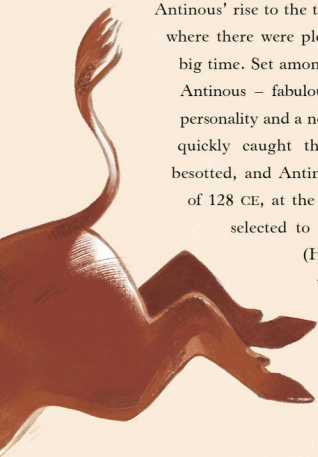
If anyone was going to make Rome's fun-loving general pay attention, it was going to be the young queen sailing towards him dressed in gold.

But there was more to this than just sex appeal. For Antony, vying to hold onto his position of power amidst the remains of the crumbling Roman Republic, Cleopatra meant Egypt, and Egypt meant two things: grain and gold. Both were essential to to fund (and feed) his battle for world domination. For Cleopatra, Antony meant Rome's backing for her precarious hold on power back home, following a decade of civil war, during which the young queen had gone into exile and returned with an army to take the throne from her brother. No meeting could be more important for either of them. It was a moment well worth a bit of theatre, not to mention a spot of role play.



Their paths first crossed seven years earlier, when Hadrian – ruler of the Roman world and self-proclaimed prince of peace – took a summer jaunt across the Roman province of Bithynia, in northern Turkey, where Antinous had his home. The emperor, busy with his day job, probably did not spot Antinous among the crowds of adoring subjects and eager petitioners. But one of his retainers did – and, no doubt, with an eye to the emperor's tastes, spotted a talent in the making in the beautiful, luscious-locked young man. Antinous was duly offered a dream career: admission to the exclusive imperial retinue along with a tuition package in the emperor's personal academy in Rome. To the boy from a dusty village on the fringes of the Roman empire, this must have seemed an offer too good to be true – a one-way ticket to live among the stars. But, as any good student of mythology would have known, fly too close to the sun and you might get burned.

Antinous' rise to the top was meteoric even by Roman standards, where there were plenty of lucky chancers who made it to the big time. Set among the other staff of the imperial household, Antinous – fabulously good-looking, smart, with a magnetic personality and a notorious talent for Hadrian's beloved hunt – quickly caught the emperor's eye. Hadrian was instantly besotted, and Antinous became his paramour. In the summer of 128 CE, at the age of seventeen, Antinous was personally selected to accompany Hadrian on a tour of Greece (Hadrian was a notorious Greek enthusiast), then into Asia Minor and, finally, Egypt.



It was clear to everyone that Hadrian was unwilling to let Antinous out of his sight – and together, they took part in many extraordinary experiences on their round-the-world trip. A night-long dip into mystical revelry at the Eleusinian Mysteries of Greece. A brisk boar hunt in the highlands of Asia Minor. A quest – almost like something out of Hadrian's much-thumbed Greek mythology books – to take down a monstrous lion that had been terrorising the people of Libya. On all these adventures, the near-obsession with each other grew steadily.



Shah Jahan swept to her side and took her in his arms. She whispered to him to keep their children safe, and gave him a last promise of her love.

And in that moment, the man who controlled the world realised, with the shattering revelation of an earthquake that diverts the oldest rivers and recarves the greatest mountains, that you cannot control love, or when the one you love leaves you. He swore an unbreakable oath to her, then, as the walls became shadows and the earth bent beneath him. He would build a crowning monument in her memory, a Taj Mahal, that would not shift or change with time. People would speak, always, of their love.



The story of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal is one of the most famous love stories of all time. A tale so powerful, so enduring, so sweepingly and almost impossibly romantic, that it would come to be told alongside the great love affairs of fiction. A fairytale ever-after which has stood the test of time as an icon of love the world over, drawing millions of lovers on a near-holy pilgrimage to the great tomb.

It all started when Prince Khurram, son of the great Moghul Emperor Jahangir and the future Shah Jahan, first laid eyes on Arjumand Banu Begum – or Mumtaz Mahal, as she would come to be known. The Royal Meena Bazaar, part of the great Persian New Year festival, was an occasion primed for match-making. Here wives and daughters of the nobles (usually modestly veiled and hidden in the inner sanctum of the harem) were allowed, for a single night, to drop their veils and play dress-up in a whimsical make-believe market fair – for the private viewing of the great emperor and a few of the chosen princes only. Staged in the royal gardens under draped tents with lanterns glittering from the trees like fireflies, the emperor and his relatives moved easily among the women, who teased and bartered over the prices of their wares. So it was, in 1607, that Prince Khurram, the future Shah Jahan, first caught sight of an unveiled Arjumand Banu, granddaughter of one of the royal family's most trusted advisors.

It was love at first sight between the two, so they said. And it was a love that would change history.

At the time, the Moghul empire was about to reach its dazzling zenith. The first Moghul emperor, the fierce warrior-king Babur, had swept down with his forces from the mountains in the north barely a hundred