



CHAPTER 6.

CALIGULA'S NEEDLE: THE VATICAN OBELISK

37 A.D.

From temples dedicated to Isis to towering symbols of the sun god, Rome's Egyptomania was on show throughout the Empire after its conquest of Egypt in 30 B.C. Obelisks and other monuments taken from temples, or offered as gifts, loomed high over the city as status symbols. Today these granite behemoths sanctifying the sun stand at striking odds with the city's Christian trappings; none more so than Caligula's obelisk, now in St. Peter's Square. Getting it to Rome was a monumental effort.

Egypt's seduction of Rome started with Cleopatra and her political and passion-fueled affair with Julius Caesar. After his arrival in Egypt with his troops in 48 B.C., Cleopatra made a beeline towards Caesar, seeking his help to solve the dynastic dispute between her and her brother, King Ptolemy XIII, which had forced her into exile.

After sneaking her way across the harbor into Alexandria, then into Caesar's royal quarters wrapped in a carpet, the 21-year-old conquered the 52-year-old Caesar as an ally and a lover.

The affair produced a son, Caesarion, or "little Caesar," who, as a 13-year-