

Synopsis

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Act I

Giulio Cesare, accompanied by Curio, is welcomed in Egypt. He agrees to an appeal from Pompeio's wife Cornelia and their son Sexto for a peaceful settlement of his and Pompeio's old rivalry. Achilla, an Egyptian general, arrives with a message of welcome from Tolomeo, accompanied by a gift: the severed head of Pompeio. Cesare sends Achilla back with a message of contempt. The grief-stricken Cornelia tries to kill herself. Sexto swears to avenge his father's murder.

Cleopatra, horrified by Pompeio's beheading, decides to ally with Cesare against her brother Tolomeo to become Egypt's sole ruler. Achilla reports to Tolomeo on Cesare's angry reaction to the grisly gift, promising to kill the Roman if he can claim Cornelia as his reward.

At his camp, Cesare surveys the urn holding Pompeio's ashes and reflects on the transitory nature of human greatness. Cleopatra, now disguised as Lydia, appeals to Cesare for justice for Tolomeo's crimes. Captivated by her beauty, he promises help. Cornelia swears vengeance on Tolomeo, but Sexto determines to undertake it himself. Lydia offers the services of Nireno to help them, and engages mother and son to join Cleopatra against Tolomeo.

Tolomeo invites Cesare to occupy apartments at the royal palace, but Cesare recognizes that he must be cautious. When Sexto challenges Tolomeo to a duel, Tolomeo orders both Sexto and Cornelia's arrest. Cornelia and Sexto commiserate before being led off separately.

Act II

Cleopatra has arranged an elaborate entertainment for the seduction of Cesare. Afterwards, Nireno assures the Roman general that Lydia is awaiting him and will introduce him to Cleopatra.

Cornelia, forced to menial work, repels advances from Achilla and Tolomeo. She threatens to take her own life, but is prevented by Sexto. Nireno brings Tolomeo's order that Cornelia is to be taken to the harem, telling Sexto to follow his mother and catch Tolomeo unarmed.

Cleopatra waits for Cesare, but when he arrives they are interrupted by Curio, who tells Cesare that conspirators are planning to murder him. Cleopatra reveals her true identity and unsuccessfully attempts to quell the uprising. She urges Cesare to make his escape, but he insists on facing his assailants. Cleopatra is left to plead with the gods to preserve him and to have pity on her.

In the harem, Tolomeo indicates that Cornelia is to be his choice. Sexto is about to take revenge, when Achilla interrupts, telling Tolomeo to prepare for war. Cesare, outnumbered by the supporters of Achilla, plunged from a balcony into the sea and is believed drowned. Cleopatra has fled to the Romans and is advancing with her men against Tolomeo. Achilla reminds Tolomeo that Cornelia was promised to him as his reward for killing Cesare, but Tolomeo dismisses him as a traitor and leaves. Sexto, in despair, attempts suicide, but he is restrained by Cornelia, who renews her son's determination for vengeance against Tolomeo.

Act III

Achilla, angered by Tolomeo's broken promise, has joined forces with Cleopatra. In the ensuing battle, Tolomeo forces are victorious and Cleopatra is taken prisoner. She mourns for Cesare, and laments her fate. But Cesare is not dead: he escaped by swimming to the harbour. Sexto and Nireno find Achilla, mortally wounded, who confesses his role in the death of Pompeo and the conspiracy against Cesare. Achilla gives Sexto a seal conveying authority to command his troops, and tells him of a secret passageway into Tolomeo's palace. Cesare witnessing the scene, takes the seal from Sexto and rushes to assemble his forces.

As Cleopatra is bidding farewell to her women, Cesare rescues her. Cornelia again defends herself against Tolomeo's advances. Sexto appears and in the ensuing duel Tolomeo is killed.

Cesare and Cleopatra enter and Nireno acclaims Cesare as emperor. Cornelia and Sexto bring news of Tolomeo's death. When Caesar invests Cleopatra with Tolomeo's crown and sceptre, she declares herself a "tributary queen to the Emperor of Rome". The pair declare their undying love, and all welcome the return of peace to Egypt.