THE GOLDEN HOUSE

Written by

Mahyar Rasi

415.531.3588 Rasimahyar@gmail.com FADE IN:

INT. PALACE - ROME - DAY (DREAM)

Majestic beauty:

High ceilings. Thick columns and shiny, marble floors built by the blood, sweat and tears of the common man.

FIRES burn in bowls.

Magnificent interior design and artwork worthy of royalty.

But despite all the splendor and perfection death has come to this place in the form of--

A FALLEN ANGEL

Her name is VARINIA, 34, dark hair, wearing a sleeveless, purple tunic and about to cross to the other side.

An ever expanding blood pool forms beneath her head while she lies on her back.

One of her eyes is filled with blood as a result of blunt trauma.

She is staring right at us, extends a hand towards us.

Her lips move, but there is no sound.

END DREAM SEQUENCE

INT. ROYAL CHAMBERS - PALACE - ROME - NIGHT

Eyes SNAP open. OCTAVIA awakes.

Age 11, a child of privilege. A natural beauty and already someone you don't fuck with, even at this stage of her life.

SUPER: ITALY, 48 A.D.

Lady-in-waiting AEMILIA enters.

She is 28 with glossy, brown hair wrapped in a fabric.

Rosy cheeks and lips only made for kissing.

AEMILIA These damn nightmares. I'm so sorry, darling. (cradles her) It will pass. I promise.

She sings the princess to sleep.

INT. ROMAN VILLA IN THE COUNTRY - BED CHAMBER - DAY

AGRIPPINA enters. A steely goddess of 31 with eyes capable of breaking even the strongest will. In the halls of power she rules with an iron fist.

Her commanding presence makes everyone shake in their boots.

She looks around the room.

A SERVANT shows up at her door, petrified.

AGRIPPINA Where is my son?

SERVANT (swallows) He is... gone, your grace... searching for that peasant boy.

EXT. ITALIAN COUNTRYSIDE

Like a painting drawn by god himself: A blood-red sky. Fields and trees. Pollen floating through the air.

A sunburned horizon. Three FRIENDS at play, running like hell as though chased. NERO, 11, blue-green eyes, short, brown hair.

He looks back over his shoulder at SARAH, 7, scrawny figure, big, friendly eyes, long, dark hair.

NERO Come on, Sarah! Hurry!

Sarah struggles to catch up with the guys. She is clumsy and keeps tripping and falling.

It's almost as if she just learned how to walk the day before.

SARAH Wait for me!

Nero calls to front-runner MESSALA, 10, black hair hanging over his round, tanned face.

NERO They are gaining on us! What should we do?!

Sarah drops out of sight. Nero looks over his shoulder twice before he realizes she is gone.

He stops, thinking whether or not he should go back and help her. He forces himself to do exactly that. Messala is oblivious, keeps running.

MESSALA

We hide! Now!

Messala takes a dive to the ground, entrenches himself into the grass. He sticks his head up, waving the others in.

MESSALA (CONT'D)

Over here!

Sarah and Nero hasten, throw themselves next to him.

A column of earth-shaking ROMAN CAVALRY in standard combat gear, sword, helmet, breastplate, comes thundering along.

Messala and friends stand up to watch them ride on. They turn, look up --

PRAETORIAN CAVALRY, Caesar's personal bodyguards in mohawked helmets, armor for both man and horse, carrying spears in addition to their swords.

CHIEF PRAETORIAN Sire, your mother wishes to see you.

Nero shares a look with his friends.

MESSALA Must you leave us now?

Nero confirms with a nod.

MESSALA (CONT'D) If you go back, she will hurt you. Stay.

NERO I will return. I promise. CONTINUED: (2)

MESSALA You always promise.

Messala walks away and Sarah along with him.

EXT. ROMAN VILLAGE - LATER

Messala and Sarah walk home together. Rays of sunlight cutting through the large crop field.

Messala stops to look at the BRACELET around Sarah's wrist.

MESSALA What is that?

SARAH My mother gave it to me.

MESSALA It will slip right through your hand, it's too big.

SARAH I'm nearly eight.

They move on.

INT. MESSALA'S HOME - ROMAN VILLAGE - NIGHT

Messala, Sarah dine with their mothers.

RACHEL, 35, ponytail, a body to die for, curvy, busty.

SOPHIA, 37, long, ragged brown hair. The lines on her face and the dark circles under her eyes are remnants of a lifetime of hardships and destitution.

SOPHIA

Cassius has been gone three days. I wonder what's keeping him.

RACHEL

At least he is not traveling alone. I told my husband you would feel much better if Cassius had someone to accompany him on his journey. Ephraim was glad to be that someone.

SOPHIA He is a good man.

RACHEL

What are friends for?

The SOUND of a moving wagon hollers in the distance.

Rachel opens the door. A horse-drawn cart rumbles to a halt.

EPHRAIM, a god fearing man of 42, removes a mortally wounded MAN from the back of the cart.

Ephraim has a big, bushy beard as a sign of devoutness.

His skin darkened by the sun, emphasizing his Middle-Eastern features. His hands worked to the bones.

Ephraim carefully places the man's body on the table.

His name is CASSIUS, 40, olive skin, black hair. All watch as Ephraim struggles to save Cassius from bleeding to death.

Cassius dies. Ephraim stands frozen, rendered speechless with grief. Everyone is.

Sophia's face is one of crushing defeat and trauma.

Her eyes fill with tears. She turns away.

Braces herself against the wall. Her legs fail. Rachel rushes to her aid.

Ephraim and Sarah keep their distance, allowing Messala to have some alone time with dead Cassius. Sophia sobs in Rachel's arms.

EXT. ROMAN VILLAGE - MOMENTS LATER

Messala sits staring at the moon. Ephraim sits beside him.

EPHRAIM

Sarah is my daughter and if something happened to me I would want her to know why. Your father owed money to a man named Marius Septimus, a commander in the Roman military. He is politically well connected and surrounds himself with his own private army. Your father asked for an extension to pay his debt. (MORE) 5.

EPHRAIM (CONT'D) Marius denied his request and struck him down in a drunken state.

MESSALA What happens now?

EPHRAIM

If Marius doesn't get his money soon, he will turn loose his army upon the village. But I'm sure that was just the wine talking. You should go home now.

He does, leaving Ephraim standing alone.

EPHRAIM (CONT'D) I pray he may keep you safe.

INT. ROMAN VILLA IN THE COUNTRY - BED CHAMBER - NIGHT

Nero enters through the bedroom curtain. A powerful BLOW to his face knocks him down. It's Agrippina.

She kicks him to the side. Nero yells and faces the floor with his hand to his stomach. His eyes closed. His mouth open in pain. Agrippina goes down on one knee and subjects him to her wrath as he lies in agony.

> AGRIPPINA You bloody bastard! How dare you ignore my orders?! I told you to stay away from that boy!

Nero struggles to speak.

NERO ... He is my friend.

Agrippina slaps him, seizing his face.

AGRIPPINA

You have no friend but me! I'm your mother! Your protection! I'm tired of fearing for your life all the time. I can't live like this! I can't look at you anymore!

She digs her thumbs into his cheeks.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) You disgust me!

Nero screams. Agrippina slaps him down to the floor.

She covers her ears, trembles, grits her teeth, eyes shut.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) Stop screaming! Stop...! Stop...!

Agrippina opens her eyes again, removes her hands from her ears and beats him into unconsciousness.

Blood drips from his nose. His mouth hangs open. Agrippina glares at him. Out of breath.

INT. MESSALA'S HOME - ROMAN VILLAGE - NIGHT

Messala watches the moon from his bed at the window.

In the distance, a formation of TORCHES snakes its way into the woods.

EXT. THE WOODS - MOMENTS LATER

Messala walks amongst the trees in search of the torchbearers. He finds a secret entrance in the ground.

LIGHT cutting through its cracks.

Messala kneels and pulls open the entrance doors one at a time, reveals to himself a FIRE-LIT staircase leading below ground.

He sticks his head inside for a closer look.

INT. CATACOMBS

Messala makes his way through the FIRE-LIT, mysterious paths constructed as a network of tunnels with vaults, altars, stairwells, lower and upper levels.

MOMENTS LATER

Messala sneaks along a rock wall, all the way to its FIRE-LIT edge where he stops.

His eyes go further and discover a TEMPLE cut into the rock.

A mystical place with TORCHES on the walls and scattered CANDLES casting a golden GLOW throughout the room, as if it were blessed by the holy lord himself.

There are paintings on the walls also, illustrating HOLY MEN, SAINTS and MARTYRS.

Among the DARK ROBES: Ephraim, Rachel and Sarah.

Heads bowed in prayer, eyes closed, hands folded across their laps. With his cheek and one hand pressed against the edge of the wall Messala looks on.

Sarah spots him looking over her shoulder.

Their gazes lock. Messala is captured in the grip of her eyes sparkling in the reflection of FIRE-LIGHT upon them.

He then backs up and disappears into the darkness.

The worshippers cross themselves.

INT. BED CHAMBER - ROMAN VILLA IN THE COUNTRY - NIGHT

Nero sits on a chair with an absent look and bruises on his face, never blinks. Agrippina eyes him from the door. Enters.

AGRIPPINA

I have suffered to provide you this life and this is how you repay me.

She crouches before him.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) Now, listen to me carefully. The emperor, my master and yours, has killed more people than the plaque. We are still breathing because I promised him a male heir. If I don't deliver, then there is no telling what he will do to us. Did you hear what I said? We are going back to Rome where we belong after years of exile. You are the heir to the throne now. You and no other. It is your birthright. Your destiny. Don't fight it. Embrace it.

Agrippina fails to illicit a reaction from Nero. She rises and leaves the room. The door shuts.

Nero moves through the now empty room with his head bowed.

He wraps his arms around a column and presses his cheek to it with teary eyes. He slams his head against the column until he knocks himself out. He drops to the floor, losing blood.

INT. MESSALA'S HOME - ROMAN VILLAGE - MORNING

Messala awakes and gets out of bed.

EXT. THE WOODS - MOMENTS LATER

Messala scouts the place, always moving, leaving no stone untouched.

He stops to think, trying to figure out which way to go. It looks like he is giving up. He sits down under a tree.

MESSALA They will come. And when they do I will see them.

LATER

Messala awakes under the tree.

ROMAN VILLAGE - MOMENTS LATER

Messala arrives. Crosses the village perimeter as the soil beneath his feet gradually turns BLACK and SCORCHED.

What his eyes see are the remains of a biblical holocaust.

HOMES BURN. SURVIVORS stack up the DEAD on carts.

FAMILIES mourn their LOVED ONES.

Sophia hauls corpses.

Her gaze narrows on a faraway OBJECT that makes her pause.

The SMOKE clouds her vision. The object gets closer. Sophia walks. Bursts into a run when she realizes it's her boy.

SOPHIA

Messala!

She lifts him with tears of relief, squeezes him and showers him with emotions like there is no tomorrow.

9.

SOPHIA (CONT'D) Where have you been? I almost lost my mind looking for you. Never go anywhere without me. Do you understand?

Again she embraces him.

SOPHIA (CONT'D) I was afraid they took you from me.

MESSALA It was him, wasn't it?

She looks at him.

MESSALA (CONT'D) Marius.

SOPHIA Let's find our friends.

MOMENTS LATER

Mother and son walk together, surrounded by death.

Their friends were not so lucky as it turns out.

Rachel has fallen victim to the sword. Her blood sticks to Ephraim's face who buries it into her neck and cries.

Messala sits next to Sarah.

Her teary eyes meet his emotionally void gaze.

Sophia weeps into her palm.

INT. CATACOMBS - DAY

Rachel's corpse lies wrapped in a transparent cloth on a stone platform, bathed in FIRE-LIGHT.

Ephraim leans over the body and places his lips on hers.

FELLOW WORSHIPPERS have come to pay their respect. Sarah takes Messala's hand, who attends with Sophia, looks at him.

SARAH Messala... Why did this happen?

Messala is speechless while gazing into the sad and inescapable eyes of this precious angel.

EXT. ROMAN VILLAGE - NIGHT

Messala and Sophia witness a Roman MASS FUNERAL. Grief songs are played on flutes.

SOPHIA They honor the dead with the belief and hope that they will safely reach the afterlife.

The personal belongings of the dead are thrown onto the pyres. PEOPLE go around with torches and set them on FIRE.

SOPHIA (CONT'D) We can't stay here. It is time we move on. Seek a new beginning.

EXT. ROMAN VILLAGE - DAY

Sophia minds the children while Ephraim loads food and supply bags onto a horse-drawn wagon. He turns around and goes back to Sophia.

> EPHRAIM Where will you go?

> > SOPHIA

Far from Marius and the reach of his sword. If we stay, he will hunt us down. I will not spend the rest of my life running and hiding.

EPHRAIM I will tell everyone you died in the carnage. It will keep him from pursuing you.

SOPHIA Worry about your daughter. You two need each other now more than ever.

Ephraim's face appears burdened with guilt.

EPHRAIM

I'm sorry I didn't bring back your husband alive. I'm sorry I wasn't man enough to save him.

SOPHIA You just buried the mother of your child and all you care about is the misfortune of others.

Ephraim tears up. Sophia rewards his selflessness by dispensing kisses. One goes to Ephraim on the cheek.

SOPHIA (CONT'D) I will never forget you.

Another goes to Sarah on the forehead.

SOPHIA (CONT'D) Good-bye, little Sarah. I will miss you the most.

Sophia's caressing hand comes off the kid's face when her fingers can longer reach it as she pushes on.

Sophia mans the wagon. Messala climbs into the back.

EPHRAIM (to Messala) You are the man in the family now. Look after your mother.

SOPHIA

Farewell.

Sophia drives. Ephraim waves good-bye. Messala waves back.

EXT. BALCONY WINDOW - PALACE - ROME - DAY

SUPER: TWENTY YEARS LATER

From the railing, embraced by the rosy GLOW of the setting sun, and more seductive than ever, 51 year old Agrippina feasts her eyes upon the eternal city in all its glory.

She turns and re-enters

THE ROYAL CHAMBERS

Sits on the edge of her bed, looking in the face of death. CLAUDIUS that is, the almighty caesar, not so mighty anymore.

Age 75, thin as a toothpick, bald, pale, wrinkled, drooped. His mouth hangs open. His eyes milky and frozen. Agrippina loosens his grip on an empty cup, glares.

AGRIPPINA

Rest in peace, Caesar.

She runs a hand over his face. His eyelids drop.

ROYAL TOMB

PRAETORIANS guard the four corners of the TORCH-LIT room.

Tainted in the face with grief, Octavia enters.

She has grown into a dazzling princess of 31, born to rule and sacrifice. Every move is a statement.

She is athletic, cunning, spoiled, the pride of Roman might.

Claudius lies in state at the end of the columned room.

Octavia approaches the open sarcophagus, moved to tears by the sight of her skinny, old man. She kisses his forehead, whispers.

OCTAVIA

I will not disappoint you, father.

She mourns. A second PERSON enters the room. Nero, 31.

His face perfect and well-proportioned like a sculpture, apart from the scar on his forehead that's been there since the day he butted his skull against a column.

His hair untamed, reaching to his shoulders and beyond.

Nero moves forward, positions himself at Octavia's side. They just stand there, sharing looks. No talk.

Only looks that speak a million words.

INT. PALACE - ROME - DAY

The gathering of NOBLES such as toga-dressed SENATORS and uniformed MILITARY MEN pales at the sight of empress and emperor to be, Nero and Octavia.

Agrippina supervises the wedding procedure.

Nero and Octavia "tie the knot" in front of a PRIEST by the altar. Only one BRIDESMAID is present, as Roman customs require.

NERO ... And I, Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, take you, Octavia, to be my bride. My empress. I shall love you and honor your name so long as I live.

The lovers share a smile and kiss.

EXT. ITALIAN COUNTRYSIDE - NIGHT

SUPER: ITALY

Agrippina takes the lead while she and her Praetorian escort of a dozen MEN ride out into the night.

EXT. SENECA'S HOUSE IN THE COUNTRY

Agrippina and the Praetorians arrive.

INT. SENECA'S HOUSE

LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA, 70, lean, two months of beard growth, talks to Agrippina at his desk. Their faces bathed in CANDLE LIGHT.

AGRIPPINA It's very kind of you to receive me. I realize the hour is late.

SENECA I will always have time for you, your majesty. Now, what is so urgent that you have come to see me?

AGRIPPINA I need to speak to you about Nero.

SENECA Ah... the succession. I can understand why this troubles you.

AGRIPPINA Do you think he is worthy?

SENECA

Do you?

AGRIPPINA

He was always complicated as a child, defied me whenever he could. At times I treated him rather harshly, but only to make him strong. Every boy needs a father. Since I couldn't provide one, I had to be twice the man than most.

SENECA

You thought you could train him to be like you. You can teach children anything, but never what to think or to feel as you do. Nero is like a son to me. He is also my student and I want to see him happy. He has now found himself a queen who will make him truly happy, yet his spirit is weak. He tried to take his own life several times. Who is to say he won't try it again?

AGRIPPINA What should I do?

SENECA Time will tell.

INT. ROYAL CHAMBERS - PALACE - ROME - DAY

Octavia holds Nero's shaking hands as they sit together.

NERO Last time I was this nervous I was proposing to you. Tell me again, why are we doing this?

OCTAVIA

It's just a formality which will confirm that the loyalty of the Praetorian Guard lies with the new emperor. Your safety is their purpose.

NERO They couldn't protect your father. What makes you think it will be different this time? OCTAVIA

What happened to my father was beyond anyone's control. The Praetorians never betrayed him.

NERO Because he paid too well.

OCTAVIA And so will you. It's a necessary expense for us all. I want to feel safe.

NERO But can we afford it?

OCTAVIA

Can we afford not to? Everything we have achieved, our wealth and possessions, your throne, your authority as caesar are meaningless without the backing of the Praetorian Guard.

Nero drops his head and exhales. Octavia brings it up again.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) What's the worst that can happen? Hm? If you feel you are losing your nerve, run. Run away. That's what you said to me, remember? After you proposed. You said: "Run away with me, my love. Run away with me." You have nothing to worry about, so stop tormenting yourself and start looking on the bright side. This is your day.

NERO

Not mine. Ours. I wouldn't be here if not for you.

OCTAVIA The feeling is mutual. You are the best thing that ever happened to me. You and you alone.

NERO

Truly?

OCTAVIA Have I ever lied to you? CONTINUED: (2)

NERO

Never.

They kiss. Agrippina enters.

AGRIPPINA

My son --

The lovers face her.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D)

It is time.

MOMENTS LATER

In the backside of the palace Nero walks along the ranks of SENATORS and OFFICERS, exchanges greetings, receiving kisses on his hand. Agrippina and her ENTOURAGE follow.

Nero is approached by his DOG.

NERO Come here... Come here, boy.

Nero kneels, strokes and cuddles the dog.

NERO (CONT'D) Here you are... where have you been? I missed you...

Meanwhile Agrippina and Aemilia talk in private, quietly.

AEMILIA The succession is being challenged. Someone has been stirring up the senate against the court, calling the heir to the throne illegitimate.

AGRIPPINA I presume that someone has a name.

AEMILIA

Senator Piso.

Nero rises. Agrippina kisses him on both cheeks.

AGRIPPINA

Hail, Caesar. I'm proud of you.

17.

NERO Thank you, mother.

Agrippina steps aside, clearing his view on Octavia.

Senator GAIUS CALPURNIUS PISO, 64, Mediterranean complexion, receding hairline, stares at Aemilia who stares back briefly and inconspicuously. Octavia has been saying some encouraging words to Nero.

OCTAVIA ... We will stay close. Go.

He does, pauses one step from the curtain. The SUN hits one side of his face as he sneaks a peek through the curtain.

He sweats and catches his breath, swallows. His eyes close and open again. Nero pushes himself to go, parts the curtain and walks out.

ON THE OTHER SIDE

Nero walks along a colonnade. Stopping between two columns he shields his eyes from the SUN with his hand.

Beneath this LIGHT, on a massive square, dozens of PRAETORIANS raise their spears into the air, salute him with a warcry.

Nero moves to the edge of the staircase platform, presents himself to the Praetorians. Behind him the two women in his life look on. Octavia smiles at him with pride.

INT. PALACE - ROME - NIGHT

Female DANCERS swarm over the floor, performing to fast-paced music.

The RICH and BEAUTIFUL, MEN and WOMEN wrapped in togas, silk, satin and jewelry, have gathered to witness the show.

PRAETORIANS stand to their posts along the colonnaded second floor.

Behind them, from the shadows, Agrippina steps up to the balustrade overlooking the crowd.

Senator Piso mingles with the other guests.

A GUARD escorts him out of the room.

AGRIPPINA'S OFFICE

Senator Piso sits while Agrippina prefers to stand.

AGRIPPINA

I'm surprised to see you here, senator. After all, wasn't it you who impugned the legitimacy of the succession?

SENATOR PISO

I didn't come here to celebrate. I'm a man of the people and every now and then I like to walk among them. Now... as for our little prince...

AGRIPPINA

Caesar.

SENATOR PISO

Caesar...

He smirks.

SENATOR PISO (CONT'D) I'm sorry, my mistake. The young emperor's lack of experience and improper age are a source of concern for all members of the senate. It's not just me, you know.

AGRIPPINA

Really?

He pauses.

SENATOR PISO

I understand that this can be a delicate subject to talk about when your own child is involved... but that is not why you called for me, is it?

AGRIPPINA

No.

SENATOR PISO What do you want?

AGRIPPINA

I want you to stop agitating against my family and mind your own affairs. Nero is my son. He is Claudius's rightful heir, always has been, whether you like it or not.

She approaches him.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) You have been playing a dangerous game, senator. Your plan to turn everyone against his majesty and myself will be short-lived, I can promise you that. Treason will not go unpunished.

SENATOR PISO

Then you and I have something in common.

AGRIPPINA

Do explain.

SENATOR PISO You know how it is. The mob loves to gossip.

AGRIPPINA And what does the mob gossip about?

SENATOR PISO That you never forgave your husband for his infidelity which may or may have not yielded another contender for the throne. One too many.

He grins.

SENATOR PISO (CONT'D)

I'm curious as to how your grace would deal with such calamity, gossip or not.

AGRIPPINA

(pauses) Accordingly.

The senator rises.

SENATOR PISO

Before I remove myself might I suggest we stay clear of each other's throats to avoid further -shall we say -- gossip. It might draw attention and we wouldn't want that, would we?

Piso has the upper hand and she knows it.

SENATOR PISO (CONT'D) Do give my regards to his majesty.

Piso exits.

INT. AGRIPPINA'S PRIVATE CHAMBERS - LATER IN THE NIGHT

Agrippina lies awake in bed, worry-eyed. Aemilia enters.

AGRIPPINA What do you want?

AEMILIA I beg your pardon, your grace. I have an important message from Ostia.

AGRIPPINA

Go on.

AEMILIA Marius Septimus has been assassinated.

Their eyes meet.

INT. PRISON - OSTIA - NIGHT

SUPER: OSTIA

Wearing a hooded cloak, Agrippina marches down a corridor, followed by a prison GUARD.

They stop at the last cell. The guard opens the door with his key.

CELL

Messala sits with his back to the wall, his shackled arms rest on his knees.

He is now 30 and has the physique of a Greek statue, without the six-pack and biceps though. He wears his hair short and has grown a beard, clean and trimmed.

Agrippina enters, takes off her hood. Messala rises.

AGRIPPINA Back from the dead I see.

MESSALA

Your Grace.

AGRIPPINA You know who I am?

MESSALA

A man knows when he is in the presence of a queen. I did not expect a visit from you.

AGRIPPINA

And I expected you to be smart enough not to get caught. I'm here because I rather not see my son involved in political murder. The court must under no circumstances be implicated in the assassination of Marius Septimus.

MESSALA

I'm no assassin.

AGRIPPINA

Of course not. You had your personal reasons. After all, he killed your father.

MESSALA

How did you --

AGRIPPINA

I have read every letter you and Nero have been exchanging for the past five years. I know that you lost your home. I know that you and your mother spent twenty years hiding in a country that wasn't your own. I know that you have waited twenty years to avenge your father.

CONTINUED: (2)

Messala reacts to the last sentence.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D)

Marius was my enemy, too. As I discovered his plan to steal the throne at sword-point I chose not to act upon it because I knew he would soon be taken care of, just as you said in your letter.

MESSALA

I'm glad I could be of service.

AGRIPPINA

I prefer to see it as a happy coincidence.

MESSALA

So what have you planned for me next?

AGRIPPINA

No more plans. Only a request. A personal favor to settle your debt to me for getting you out of prison without raising suspicion and compromising the court.

MESSALA

What sort of favor?

AGRIPPINA

You will find out soon enough.

Agrippina retreats to the door.

MESSALA

You are going to leave me here?

AGRIPPINA

I can't protect you while you are still in prison nor can I issue an official pardon.

MESSALA

There must be a way. I promised his majesty I would visit him on my return from Asia. I gave him my word.

AGRIPPINA

And I will make sure you keep it.

Agrippina exits.

EXT. PRISON - OSTIA - NIGHT

PRISONERS clash with the GUARDS during their escape from the raging FIRE within the prison walls.

Messala and the other INMATES breach the gate into freedom. A HORSEMAN loiters fifty yards away and he has brought a second horse.

Messala mounts it and the two ride off into the night.

INT. PALACE - ROME - NIGHT

Bathed and properly dressed, Messala is waiting for the emperor to receive him. Agrippina enters.

AGRIPPINA You made it. You are free.

MESSALA Your plan succeeded. You saved my life. How can I repay you?

AGRIPPINA

We can discuss it later. You are welcome to stay as our guest. My house in the country has been made available to you.

MESSALA

Thank you.

Nero barges in. His face lights up at the sight of Messala.

NERO

There you are. It's about bloody time.

MESSALA

Majesty.

They embrace, sharing laughs of joy. Nero holds him by the shoulders to look at his face, exhales.

NERO

Welcome home.

ROYAL CHAMBERS - LATER

He and Nero talk and drink together, having a good time. Octavia and Aemilia watch them from the next room through a hole in the door.

NEXT ROOM

Octavia and Aemilia are huddled together at the foot of the door. They take turns peering through the hole.

OCTAVIA This is hardly the time for an audience. Who is this?

AEMILIA

Apparently, a friend your husband thought he had lost as a boy.

OCTAVIA What is he doing here?

AEMILIA

He will be staying at your motherin-laws' house outside of Rome. Temporarily, of course.

OCTAVIA

Of course.

ROYAL CHAMBERS

Nero hands Messala a wine cup.

NERO

I have been looking forward to this since the first time you contacted me five years ago. I know so much about you. It's as if you never left. I remember like it was yesterday when I ran away from my home in the country. You happened to be in the area that night and brought me back. MESSALA It was the beginning of a wonderful friendship.

Both take a sip.

MESSALA (CONT'D) I wish I had come sooner to observe the succession and your wedding. Your wife, who is she?

NERO My predecessor's daughter from his first marriage.

MESSALA

Claudius...

NERO His only child. Octavia.

MESSALA I'm impressed.

NERO The important thing is you gave that bastard Marius what he deserved.

MESSALA If I hadn't someone else would have, I'm sure.

Messala gazes at the room.

MESSALA (CONT'D) You are living the life I see. Your mother loves you very dearly, you know. She gave you the world.

Messala drinks.

NERO Are you talking about the same woman who frowned upon our friendship because she thought you had bad influence on me? CONTINUED: (2)

MESSALA

That's all in the past. She is not the woman she once was or else we wouldn't be having this conversation.

Messala drinks up and puts the cup on a table.

MESSALA (CONT'D) It's getting late.

NERO We should celebrate. Tomorrow night.

MESSALA I look forward to that.

NERO Your horse is ready. My personal guards will escort you to the estate. Good night, my friend.

Messala bows to him.

MESSALA

Majesty.

Nero watches him clear out of the room.

EXT. MARKET - ROME - DAY

Messala takes a stroll through the crowded market. Browses through the stands.

A WOMAN'S BRACELET draws his attention when they simultaneously reach into the same fruit basket.

He looks up. Sarah, 27, robed from head to toe.

She has a heart of gold and eyes revealing innocence and justice.

Messala consumes this incredible vision of a woman with his eyes. Sarah catches him staring. Returns his smile.

Sarah goes about her business and before she knows it he is standing behind her.

MESSALA

Sarah...

She turns, studies his face.

SARAH

Have we met?

He delays his response.

MESSALA A long time ago.

INT. TAVERN - ROME - NIGHT

Sarah and Messala sit across from each other at a corner table.

SARAH How did you know it was me?

MESSALA

I couldn't help noticing the bracelet you are wearing. Your mother gave it to you when you were seven.

SARAH You remember.

MESSALA I don't forget so easily.

SARAH I'm not sure if I would remember

myself.

MESSALA

Who would? Twenty years is a long time. It's most unfortunate that... the world and the life we used to know ended so quickly.

SARAH

The world we knew never existed. Appearances can be deceiving for a young mind. My eyes are open now and I don't like what I see.

MESSALA

Surely, there must be something that is to your liking. Or someone.

SARAH Not since I lost my father. He died in his sleep, many years ago.

MESSALA

I'm sorry.

She smiles at him in gratitude.

SARAH Well, I should be on my way now. It was nice seeing you again.

Both rise from their chair.

MESSALA Sarah, wait...

•

She does.

MESSALA (CONT'D) Can I see you again?

SARAH

Why?

MESSALA For old times sake.

SARAH I don't think that is such a good idea. We don't know each other very well. I'm sorry. Farewell.

Sarah vanishes into the crowd.

EXT. VILLAGE RUINS - NIGHT

Messala rides to the village he used to live in and finds it abandoned.

Retaken by nature after years of human absence.

Messala views everything from his mount as he moves from door to door, including that of his family, at which point he dismounts to go inside.

INT. MESSALA'S HOME

Messala seems to drift away, mentally, losing himself in memories.

Being carried away in the process, he finds himself inside the room he used to sleep in.

He walks up to the window he used to look out of from his bed at the time. He pops his head in the window again and the first place the eyes are drawn to are the woods.

THE WOODS

Messala dismounts, ties the horse to a tree.

MOMENTS LATER IN THE WOODS

As he makes his way through, something causes him to stop and jump behind a tree for cover. It's a couple of dark-cloaked WORSHIPPERS leaving the woods.

MOMENTS LATER

Messala stops, turns in every direction, looking lost.

He searches the area around him, digging through the vegetation and... BINGO: yet again he uncovers the double-sided, hidden underground doors.

Opens them, ventures down the staircase.

INT. CATACOMBS

Messala passes by the living quarter of some random male worshipper, stealing that person's dark robe while he is asleep, wearing it as a disguise.

It enables him to blend into the line of WORSHIPPERS marching by.

PRAYER HALL

All bow their heads while the PRIEST recites holy words. Messala takes this moment to look around.

Locates Sarah across the room.

The priest is done reciting. All WORSHIPPERS cross themselves, disperse and go about their business.

Messala walks up behind Sarah.

MESSALA We must stop meeting like this.

SARAH (unpleasantly surprised) What are you doing here?

MESSALA

Looking for you.

SARAH How did you know where I was?

MESSALA I remembered. I have seen this place before.

SARAH

(sarcastically) Yes, I know, you don't forget so easily. Congratulations, you have a gift.

She walks. He follows.

MESSALA Who are all these people?

SARAH

These are my brethren. Not that you would understand that, Roman.

MESSALA How could I? I was an only child.

They stop. He smiles. She doesn't.

SARAH

Don't mock me.

MESSALA I would never mock a friend.

SARAH We are not friends.

They walk again.

SARAH (CONT'D) You don't belong here. Go home.

MESSALA

I do not have a home.

She stops, turns.

MESSALA (CONT'D) I have lived in exile for twenty years, I'm a stranger in my own country. Please, don't send me away.

The compassion in her eyes says she won't.

LATER

Messala and Sarah kneel before a CANDLE-LIT shrine.

SARAH

I remember coming here with my parents. The only thing worse than losing a loved one is remembering the loss.

MESSALA How do you live with it?

SARAH

Faith.

MESSALA

Faith?

SARAH

Faith is stronger than the sword. Faith gives us strength and purpose.

MESSALA

I don't believe in religion. Life is short and I have no intention to waste every moment of it satisfying the expectations of higher powers that only exist within people's imagination.

SARAH

Can I ask you a question? When you told me where you were going, did you mean it?

MESSALA

I did.

SARAH You are going to be seated at the same table with the highest authority in the land?

MESSALA

I believe you know him.

SARAH I knew the boy. The man I could care less about.

MESSALA

Sarah...

SARAH

I know what you are going to say. Life is too short to waste on past wrongs that cannot be righted.

MESSALA

Nero did not kill your mother, Marius did. It was a long time ago. I have moved on, why can't you?

SARAH

You have no idea what you are getting yourself into. Save yourself while you can. Don't go.

MESSALA

I made up my mind.

SARAH

In that case I would consider it a personal favor if you didn't tell anyone you know me.

MESSALA

You have been acting mysteriously ever since I saw you in the market. And now you are asking me to pretend this conversation never happened. What are you so afraid of?

SARAH

It's not me I'm worried about. You are sitting on sacred ground. This is where people come to worship. Men, women, children, families. Their safety depends on this location to remain secret.

MESSALA

Secret? Who are they hiding from?

SARAH

All I need to hear from you right now is that you won't share with anyone what you saw here tonight.

MESSALA

I give you my word. (ponders) On second thought, how can I be trusted with a secret?

SARAH

What?

MESSALA

Unless, of course, you are asking me as a friend.

SARAH

Um... of, of course...

MESSALA

As I recall, you weren't too happy to see me. Your first reaction was to antagonize me and tell me to go home.

SARAH

I'm sorry for my rude behavior. And yes, I'm asking you as a friend.

MESSALA And friends always rejoice in each other's company. They return favors.

SARAH I see. What do you want?

MESSALA

I want to see you again. With your permission, of course.

SARAH You don't need my permission. You are a free man.

MESSALA I will take that as a "yes".

INT. ROYAL CHAMBERS - PALACE - ROME - DAY

Messala and Nero enjoy the wine. There is enough food on the table to feed the entire city, but the two haven't touched it yet.

NERO So how do you like your new quarters?

MESSALA It's what I call a proper accommodation.

NERO

But you are alone. What's the point of having a home without a wife to come home to? Any luck finding your future bride?

MESSALA I wasn't looking, actually. Probably because I don't find myself worthy of marriage.

NERO

Why not?

MESSALA

Before my father proposed to my mother he had a life of his own. He built his own house, raised crops on his own land.

Messala looks at the cup in his hand.
MESSALA (CONT'D) I can barely pay for this wine, let alone feed a family. The women can wait. I know I can.

Nero raises his cup.

NERO

To women.

Messala raises his. They drink.

EXT. THE WOODS - DAY

Sarah exits the catacombs through the secret entrance and covers the doors with leafs.

MOMENTS LATER

On her way through the woods Sarah crosses paths with Messala who sits atop a horse loaded with bags. Sarah startles.

MESSALA I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you.

SARAH Messala... you are back.

MESSALA

As promised. I have brought food. Courtesy of the royal court. Would you like to join me?

SARAH I was on my way to the market.

Messala taps one of the bags.

MESSALA The market has come to you.

EXT. ITALIAN COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

Messala and Sarah ride out into the mountains.

LATER IN THE MOUNTAINS

Messala and Sarah are joined up in the hills, breaking bread with each other. The morning sun has painted the horizon.

SARAH

So how long have you lived in exile?

MESSALA

Asia was my home for twenty years. It was my mother's idea of a sanctuary. Apparently, Rome has no presence there. After she died I came back here. To leave my troubles behind and build a better future for myself. I belong here.

SARAH

I'm sorry for your loss.

MESSALA

I don't know if I deserve your compassion.

SARAH Why do you say that?

MESSALA

What would you say if I told you that I never wept once in my life? Not even when my mother died, or my father. I'm a bad son?

SARAH

We all have our ways of dealing with grief.

MESSALA You are kind. You know, I just realized something. There is no man in your life.

Sarah almost spits out her food from laughing. He is laughing, too.

SARAH My goodness, do you always stick your nose where it doesn't belong?

MESSALA I'm curious by nature.

SARAH My personal life doesn't concern you. I don't have to tell you anything. MESSALA

You already have.

SARAH So now you are telling me you can determine if someone is lying or not. You are truly gifted.

MESSALA We are both here for the same reason. There is no one out there waiting for us.

EXT. THE WOODS - NIGHT

Messala gives Sarah a moonlit ride home through the woods. He dismounts first to assist her in doing the same.

MESSALA

You don't have to go back down there. Let's find you a more comfortable place for tonight. It would be a nice change.

SARAH I appreciate the offer, but I must refuse. I actually enjoyed our time together. Thank you.

MESSALA

It wasn't the last time I hope.

Messala takes her hands like a lover, confirming her worst fear. Sarah reacts with restrained alarm.

MESSALA (CONT'D) It doesn't have to end here. I want to know more about you. I haven't seen you for a long time.

SARAH

Now you have.

MESSALA

I know, but, I want us to be friends again and spend more time together as we did when we were children.

SARAH We are not children anymore. As much as I care about the past, I'm afraid there is no future for us. MESSALA I can change your mind. All I need is time. SARAH Messala --MESSALA Come to my house tomorrow. Please. SARAH Your house? You told me you don't have a --MESSALA I can explain that. If you accept my invitation. SARAH I can't. It's too dangerous. MESSALA Dangerous? SARAH Yes. She leaves him wondering. SARAH (CONT'D) I'm Jewish. MESSALA I would never hold that against you, you know that. SARAH The truth is far more complicated.

> MESSALA The world is a lonely place. All we have is each other. Please. Allow me to be your host. Will you?

Sarah looks like she pushes herself to decline, but...

CONTINUED: (2)

SARAH

Yes.

Messala smiles. He turns around and mounts his horse.

MESSALA It's settled, then. I will be seeing you tomorrow.

Sarah nods yes without sharing his enthusiasm.

SARAH You know where to find me.

MESSALA I know where to find you. Good night.

Sarah watches him ride off.

SARAH Good night.

INTERCUTTING SHOTS

- The sun rises.
- Messala riding through the landscape.

- Messala steering his horse through the woods where Sarah is waiting for him. Sarah mounts and they ride together.

- Messala and Sarah riding through the day.
- Messala and Sarah nearing Agrippina's summer house.
- Messala dismounts, opens the gate.
- Messala and Sarah ride through on a road lined with trees.

INT. AGRIPPINA'S SUMMER HOUSE

Messala reaches for the doors to the private chambers. Sarah is behind him.

MESSALA Wait until you see this. I call it "My golden house". It's splendid, you will see.

He is about to pull open the doors.

40.

SARAH You actually live here?

He stops.

SARAH (CONT'D) You said this was your house.

MESSALA For now. The court was kind enough to put me here.

Sarah is fear-struck.

SARAH The court?! You are telling me this now?! Are you mad?! What if someone sees us?! I'm not supposed to be here! (turns away) I should have never listened to you.

He stops her from leaving.

MESSALA Don't go yet, we just got here.

SARAH You deceived me. I'm leaving.

MESSALA You can't do that, you made a promise.

He turns Sarah around to face her.

MESSALA (CONT'D) Listen... listen to me... no one knows we are here. It's just you and me. Trust me.

Sarah frowns.

CORRIDOR

Messala and Sarah walk together. DAYLIGHT streaming through a lineup of windows.

MESSALA I never dreamed of living in a place like this. (MORE)

MESSALA (CONT'D) It's the benefit of knowing people in high positions. I'm moving up in the world.

SARAH Is that why you brought me here? To impress me?

MESSALA

I thought you might appreciate sleeping in a warm bed for a change.

BED CHAMBER

They enter. Messala is drawn to the balcony. Sarah follows.

BALCONY

They share a view of the Italian landscape embedded under the orange sky.

SARAH

It's beautiful.

Messala couldn't care less. He only has eyes for her.

MESSALA

Sarah...

She is distracted by the view.

SARAH

Hm?

MESSALA Would you go to the games with me?

She looks at him.

MESSALA (CONT'D) It's something I always wanted to do.

SARAH Do you remember what I said to you in the forest? About us? I made an exception when I let you bring me here today. This has to stop. (MORE) SARAH (CONT'D) We can't see each other anymore. Give it up, Messala. It's not meant to be.

MESSALA

Sometimes man's reach exceeds his grasp. I never knew what that felt like until now. Obviously you have made up your mind.

SARAH

I have.

MESSALA Then let's get you home.

INT. ROYAL CHAMBERS - PALACE - ROME - NIGHT

Nero and Octavia sit on their bed, talking.

OCTAVIA How much longer does your friend intend to stay?

NERO Why do you ask?

OCTAVIA

Because I don't think he belongs here. He is beneath you.

NERO You sound like my mother.

OCTAVIA I will take that as a compliment.

NERO Why do you hate him so much?

OCTAVIA I don't trust strangers, that's all.

NERO Messala is not a stranger. He is my friend. Look at me... look at me...

She does.

NERO (CONT'D) He is my friend and our guest and I want you to treat him as such. Can you do that for me?

Octavia nods. They kiss and that's when it happens --

-- in a FLASH, Nero thinks he sees his mother's face on his wife's, distances himself from Octavia with fear in his eyes.

OCTAVIA

What's wrong? What happened?

Nero turns his face away from her, pulling himself together.

NERO I've been living within these walls for too long.

He bows his head. Octavia reaches for his face as it darkens with hostility. He glares at her.

NERO (CONT'D) Touch me and you will die!

Octavia pulls back her hand, shivers, looking terrified.

OCTAVIA

Caesar?

Nero's face brightens. He is changed again, behaves as if nothing has happened.

NERO

Yes?

Nero looks to his left, then to his right, then at her.

NERO (CONT'D) Did I talk in my sleep again? I hope I didn't wake you.

OUTSIDE ROYAL CHAMBERS

Octavia closes the doors as she exits the room.

She paces back and forth pressing a palm against her mouth. Her face is in a state of shock and fear.

AGRIPPINA Still sleepless at this hour?

Taken by surprise, Octavia bows to Agrippina, acting normal.

OCTAVIA

My lady.

AGRIPPINA Drop the formalities, my dear. You bow to no one, but the emperor. And Rome.

OCTAVIA

Yes, my lady.

AGRIPPINA

My son loves you. And he will need you. I want you to look after him. You will give him the strength he needs to rule. I count on you.

OCTAVIA

I will not let you down.

They walk together.

AGRIPPINA

You know, you remind me of myself at your age. We both have learned to succeed in a world ruled by men. And now...

They stop.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D)

... the world is yours. Are you up to the challenge?

OCTAVIA

Yes. And it fills me with pride. It's what I was born to do. Rome's future is in good hands. I shall treat her as my father treated my mother: like a queen.

They resume walking.

AGRIPPINA

Your father was... special. The wisest emperor Rome had ever known. And a fine husband.

OCTAVIA A fine father, too.

EXT. STREETS OF CAPUA - NIGHT

SUPER: CAPUA

Sarah sits on horseback as Messala pulls it through downtown Capua.

MESSALA

We are here.

He helps Sarah dismount.

MESSALA (CONT'D) Mind the horse. I will find us shelter for tonight. We leave at dawn.

He walks away. Sarah is left alone with the horse as an angry MOB armed with torches, sticks and pitch forks pours into the streets from every direction.

Sarah backs up to the side of the street, making way for the advancing MASS. Two leashed DOGS stick their heads in the air and bark, both at her and the horse, bearing their teeth.

Sarah kicks in self-defense, guarding the horse with her life as it rises to its feet, kicking and neighing.

One dog digs its teeth into Sarah's robe and pulls it.

Sarah holds on to her robe with one hand while retaining the reins with the other until they slip from her grasp.

The horse gallops away.

SARAH

No!

The dogs are carried away by the crowd. Sarah, unharmed, pursues the horse and gets caught up in a sea of rage.

She brings herself to a stop at the foot of a CROSS being raised by EXECUTIONERS, embedded into the ground.

Another CROSS is raised next to it.

Knowing she is too close to the sight, Sarah backs up.

Tilts backwards.

Pushed back into balance by the HANDS behind her.

The same hands that form into fists waving at the two outcrying, crucified MEN.

At each cross a glowing crucifix is elevated and pressed against the prisoner's bare chest.

Leaving him with a burning mark.

Sarah touches her chest, fails to stop her tears as the horror unfolds before her eyes. The crosses are torched.

With her eyes closed, Sarah turns her back on the scene, sickened by it, shifting back and forth like a drunk.

Unable to keep her balance, Sarah topples.

She remains there, abandoned, and nobody cares.

And then, emerging from within the crowd, Messala comes to her rescue.

He kneels, announces himself with a touch on her back.

MESSALA Sarah... Sarah...

He touches her face with both hands.

MESSALA (CONT'D)

Sarah!

She opens her eyes.

MESSALA (CONT'D) Come with me, Sarah. Come with me.

Messala lifts her to her feet and bodyguards her into safety, outside the crowd. Sarah loosens herself from Messala's arm to slap him.

> SARAH Liar! You call yourself the emperor's best friend?! The man who is responsible for this?!

MESSALA This is what they do with criminals! They punish them!

SARAH

Criminal or not, it doesn't give them the right to decide who lives and who dies!

MESSALA

Don't waste your anger on a complete stranger! That man means nothing to you!

SARAH

No life on earth is meaningless! When you lie to me it is not meaningless! I trusted you! I thought you were different! How can I ever believe you again?!

MESSALA I would never lie to you, Sarah!

He points to the crowd.

MESSALA (CONT'D)

I'm not one of them, you know that! I would never hurt you! I love you!

Sarah pauses in surprise.

SARAH

How can you love me if you don't listen to me?! Stay away from me! For your own sake! You don't need me! And I don't need you! I need nothing!

Sarah closes her eyes and covers her ears, weeps. Messala reaches out to her.

MESSALA Sarah... Sarah... I'm sorry. Please, forgive me.

She pushes him away, struggles to stand.

MESSALA (CONT'D)

Sarah...

CONTINUED: (3)

Sarah faints and falls into his arms. Unable to restore her consciousness, he loads her onto the back of a horse-drawn wagon he captures by force and leaves town.

EXT. AGRIPPINA'S SUMMER HOUSE - LATER

Agrippina looks on from behind a tree as Messala hops off the wagon to open the gate. He hops back on, enters the property.

INT. AGRIPPINA'S SUMMER HOUSE - BED CHAMBER

Messala lowers Sarah to the bed. He admires her beauty from the bedside, loving her with his eyes. Then he takes off.

EXT. AGRIPPINA'S SUMMER HOUSE

Messala exits the gate, pulls it shut behind him. He climbs the wagon and drives off. Agrippina comes out of hiding, approaches the gate, enters the property.

INT. AGRIPPINA'S SUMMER HOUSE - BED CHAMBER

Agrippina plants her rear on the edge of the bed.

She squints. With her hand she clears Sarah's chest that bears the imprint of a CRUCIFIX burned into her skin long ago.

Agrippina glares. She gets back up and walks out the door.

LATER IN THE NIGHT

Sarah awakes. She steps out of the bed and sees a dress that has been laid out for her.

She starts to change, not knowing the presence of Messala who scans her silhouette with his eyes through a thin curtain, reaching towards it, craving her.

Sarah feels his touch and reacts. She shifts the curtain aside to meet his eyes... and lips.

They end up making love on the bed.

LATER

Messala and Sarah lie in bed together, talking.

SARAH I'm sorry I screamed at you. It wasn't right.

MESSALA There is nothing to be sorry about. I shouldn't have left you alone.

SARAH I owe you thanks.

MESSALA

For what?

SARAH For looking after me.

MESSALA You would have done the same for me.

Messala notices the CRUCIFIX IMPRINT on her chest, touches it.

MESSALA (CONT'D) What is this?

Sarah takes his hand off and pulls a blanket over the marked area.

SARAH It's nothing.

MESSALA You are not going to tell me?

SARAH You don't see me meddle in your affairs, do you?

She steps out of the bed to slip into her robe.

MESSALA I care about you.

Sarah ignores him. He sits up.

MESSALA (CONT'D)

I love you.

Sarah turns, yells.

CONTINUED: (2)

SARAH There is no love!

Messala freezes, stares.

SARAH (CONT'D) Not in this life! Love is an illusion! (calms) You live in a dream world. You don't love me. You only think you do. Wake up before it's too late.

MESSALA (as she turns to leave) I don't want to lose you again.

Sarah turns to respond.

SARAH You can't lose what you never had. I can't share my life with you. We would both regret it. I know I would.

She exits.

INT. ROYAL CHAMBERS - PALACE - ROME - DAY

Octavia pushes open the doors to enter. She is startled when she sees Nero drenched in his dog's blood, looking confused.

The murder weapon in his hand, a dagger. Racing to his help, Octavia falls to her knees at the scene, searching Nero's body for wounds.

> OCTAVIA What happened? Are you injured?

NERO I don't know...

Octavia takes his hand in which he holds the dagger.

OCTAVIA

And this?

NERO I keep it with me at all times. For protection.

OCTAVIA

What did you do?

NERO I don't know... My mother must never know about this. Promise me you won't say anything. Promise you will keep this between us.

OCTAVIA

I promise.

Nero tightens his grip on the dagger as Octavia grabs hold of it.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) I will not take it away from you.

NERO

You won't?

OCTAVIA Have I ever lied to you?

NERO

Never.

Nero surrenders the dagger to Octavia who then drops it on the floor.

MAIDS CHAMBER - LATER

Octavia and Aemilia sit face to face. Octavia is silent first.

She looks like she is thinking of something very dark and profound.

AEMILIA Is something wrong, dear?

Octavia snaps out of it and looks up at Aemilia.

OCTAVIA I wanted to talk to you about...

AEMILIA About what, dear? OCTAVIA Something happened today and...

AEMILIA

Yes?

Octavia drops her head, shuts her eyes.

OCTAVIA

I promised not to say anything, but... what I can tell you is that what I saw reminded me of a nightmare I've been having since I was a child. My instinct tells me I should talk to a female and you are the only one here. You've been serving my family since before I was born.

AEMILIA I feel flattered that you have decided to come to me. Even though I'm not family.

OCTAVIA You are to me.

That warrants a smile of gratitude from Aemilia.

AEMILIA Tell me about your dream.

OCTAVIA In my dreams I keep finding myself alone in the same room with a young woman...

(OCTAVIA'S MIND) INT. ROYAL CHAMBERS

Varinia lies mortally wounded on the floor. She reaches out for little Octavia while the loss of blood drains the life out of her.

> OCTAVIA (V.O.) ... She is dying... She is looking at me... Asking me to come closer.

Little Octavia kneels. Varinia gently places her hand on Octavia's head and lowers it to lock eyes, murmurs.

53.

OCTAVIA (V.O.) She speaks to me.

MAIDS CHAMBER

Octavia sits with a blank stare.

AEMILIA What is she saying?

OCTAVIA She is saying: "Never will I leave you... Never..."

AGRIPPINA'S OFFICE

She signs papers. Close-by stands Messala.

AGRIPPINA My son tells me you have a need to speak to me.

MESSALA

I can no longer sit still and go on with my life not knowing what it is you want me to do to settle my debt. After all, without your grace's effort I would still be in prison.

AGRIPPINA It just so happens that I need to speak to you as well.

She rises, walks towards him, studies his face.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) Remarkable, the resemblance. As if he was reborn... in you.

MESSALA

Who?

AGRIPPINA

Domitius. My first, great love. Nero's real father. Claudius appointed him Praetorian prefect... and then he killed him because he dared to lay hands on me. As punishment I spent the next ten years in exile, raising my son.

She walks around.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) One day I received message from Rome, bearing the signature of the emperor himself. He proposed to adopt Nero in exchange for my hand in marriage.

She circles him and stops in his sight.

MESSALA Why are you telling me all this?

AGRIPPINA Because I feel like I have known you forever.

She touches his face, kisses him. Messala breaks it off by grabbing her by the shoulders.

MESSALA No... I can't do this. I'm sorry.

AGRIPPINA Am I not good enough for you? What does she have that I don't?

Agrippina can see the reaction in his face.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) Oh, yes. I saw you together. Are you so desperate that you share my bed with a criminal?

MESSALA She is no such thing.

AGRIPPINA She bears the mark. The symbol of her god. Perhaps you have seen it.

Again she sees a reaction in his face.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) You have, haven't you? Does the name "Nazarene" mean anything to you?

MESSALA

No.

AGRIPPINA I thought so. You have been out of the country for too long. You don't know what is going on. Shall I regale you?

INT. CATACOMBS - DAY

Sarah is on her knees. Her head bowed in prayer.

SARAH Heavenly father, I seek your guidance. I have been reckless. I have endangered a man's life, a good man. Please, shed your graceful light upon him...

She touches her belly.

INT. AGRIPPINA'S OFFICE - PALACE - ROME - DAY

Messala reacts to Agrippina's claim.

MESSALA

That is her crime? Religion?

AGRIPPINA

I wish it was that simple. It all started when my husband was slain by his chambermaid Cassandra. She had long concealed her attraction to the new faith until she was discovered serving the emperor poisoned wine.

Her eyes speak louder than words, burning as if she is reliving those days.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) Her final words, before being united with her beloved creator, were: "Thank god, it's over." The god of the Nazarenes. Octavia mourned her father to the point of self-destruction. (MORE)

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) Nero sought to end her suffering by hunting down and killing every Nazarene between Rome and Jerusalem.

MESSALA

That's fitting. Half the country must die on the cross to stem the blood lust of one woman.

AGRIPPINA

Whom I choose anytime over the outcast you let into my house.

MESSALA

Stay away from her. She doesn't concern you.

AGRIPPINA

Careful. I can have you both arrested for treason. If you wish to save her I suggest you satisfy your debt to me.

MESSALA

What do you want?

AGRIPPINA

Marius was only the beginning. I see far more trouble coming from a certain politician named senator Piso. I have been watching him closely and I suspect he is conspiring against me. He must be stopped. That's where you come in.

MESSALA

I think not. No more blood. No more. I can't help you. Good-bye, my queen.

Messala advances to the door.

AGRIPPINA

And Nero?

Messala stops and faces her.

MESSALA

I have nothing more to say to him or to you. I will not become part of his slaughter campaign. CONTINUED: (2)

He is through the door.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE - NIGHT

Messala races out into the night on his horse-drawn wagon.

INT. AGRIPPINA'S OFFICE - PALACE - ROME - NIGHT

Agrippina sits with her head hanging down. A SERVANT enters.

SERVANT Pardon the intrusion, your grace. The emperor wants to see you.

INT. CATACOMBS - NIGHT

Messala surprises Sarah in mid-prayer.

MESSALA

Sarah...

Sarah looks over her shoulder. Messala kneels before her.

MESSALA (CONT'D) We must leave at once.

SARAH

What?

MESSALA She saw you. She knows who you are.

SARAH Who? Who saw me?

MESSALA

Agrippina.

SARAH The queen mother?

MESSALA We must get you out of the country with all haste, or else...

SARAH Or else what?

MESSALA

You were right, Sarah. You were always right. What I did was selfish. I was thoughtless, stubborn and I made you a target. Forgive me.

SARAH Why do you say that?

MESSALA

I know why you are afraid. I know why you don't want to be with me. I know everything. When you are persecuted for your beliefs the best way to keep the same fate from befalling the wrong people is to avoid them. What else did you not tell me?

Sarah can't look into his eyes. Messala restores eye-contact by lifting her face.

SARAH My father did not die of natural causes. After the village was destroyed they blamed him for it and betrayed him to the Romans. That's how I got this.

Sarah uncovers her chest to show him the crucifix wound.

SARAH (CONT'D) Outlawed forever.

She closes her robe.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Nazarenes die if they refuse to fit in or become slaves as I did. The man who owned me said I reminded him of his deceased daughter and set me free.

MESSALA

If you were trying to protect me why didn't you say something instead of spending all this time with me?

CONTINUED: (2)

SARAH I liked you. I couldn't say "no".

MESSALA You must leave now. Board a ship and sail as far as you can.

SARAH I will... if you sail with me.

Messala does not object.

SARAH (CONT'D) We are in this together. I couldn't live with myself if I left you behind.

MESSALA I can take care of myself.

SARAH

How?

MESSALA

I can fight.

SARAH

And spill more blood? You cannot escape the executioner by becoming one. Nothing good can come from violence.

MESSALA

Sometimes it can. I would kill to survive. To see you live.

SARAH

You have a choice. Come with me.

MESSALA

Do you think it's wise? Taking me along after all I put you through?

SARAH

What kind of a person would I be if I didn't? Come with me.

60.

EXT. THE WOODS - ROAD - NIGHT

Pulling Sarah aboard the wagon, Messala registers the absence of her bracelet.

MESSALA I knew that thing would slip through your hand eventually.

His words break her concentration that causes her to misstep, plunge downward and hit the ground.

MESSALA (CONT'D)

Sarah!

Messala leaps out, helps her to a seated position.

MESSALA (CONT'D) Are you hurt?

SARAH How could I be so careless? That bracelet belonged to my mother. If I lose it I will never forgive myself. I must go back and find it.

MESSALA Go back? Where?

Both look at each other in silence. Messala stares beyond Sarah's head, indicating awareness of the bracelet's whereabouts.

MESSALA (CONT'D) It's too late.

SARAH

What?

MESSALA I'd rather lose the bracelet than you.

SARAH This isn't your decision.

MESSALA You can't go back, it's too dangerous.

SARAH

I don't care about me.

Messala grabs her shoulders with both hands to stop her.

MESSALA But I do. Which is why I should go. Come.

Messala hoists her from her backside.

MOMENTS LATER

Messala detaches one horse from the wagon and leaves the other one at Sarah's disposal who has assumed the reins.

MESSALA This road will take you straight to the nearest port. Wait for me there.

SARAH I wouldn't have said anything if I knew it would inspire the selfless act I witness tonight. You don't have to do this.

MESSALA What kind of a person would I be if I didn't?

SARAH Just be cautious. Promise me that.

MESSALA I will see you again. You have my word. Now go.

Sarah stares at him. Then she yanks the reins and rolls off.

INT. THRONE ROOM - PALACE - ROME - NIGHT

Columns line either side of the marbled room. Across from the double door entrance, where the floor meets the wall, are the emperor's and empress's throne mounted on an elevated, staircased platform.

Nero enters, ascends the staircase, gets behind the throne and touches it. Agrippina watches him from the door. AGRIPPINA It's calling for you. This is where you belong.

He looks angry.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) What's the matter?

NERO

I just received word that our guest left the city for good. Apparently, he is under the impression that he is no longer welcome at court.

AGRIPPINA Messala... you spoke to him?

NERO

Yes. And he would still be here if it wasn't for your threats and constant interference.

AGRIPPINA It was my interference that discovered the threat before it did more damage to this family.

NERO My friend is a threat to no one.

AGRIPPINA No. But she is.

NERO

She?

AGRIPPINA The Nazarene woman. She has been with him all along.

Nero stares at her in disbelief.

NERO I knew at some point you would discredit yourself.

AGRIPPINA Please explain. NERO

There has never been a woman. He told me.

AGRIPPINA You believe him over your own mother?

NERO He never lied to me.

AGRIPPINA

Do not summon me again. I am returning to my chambers and I suggest you do the same. Unless, of course, the empress has somehow discovered a secret path to pregnancy without conception. I doubt it. I'm in need of a grandson. See to it.

NERO

No.

Agrippina glares.

AGRIPPINA

No?

NERO

Let me remind you that it is your will to which I owe my throne. And I intend to use it to the fullest. First order of the day: I will accept your resignation.

AGRIPPINA

Over my dead body.

Nero descends the staircase, walks past her towards the door.

NERO

Then it is decided. Next time you will consult with me first before putting a friend of mine out on the street.

AGRIPPINA

I believe it's tradition for the YOUNG to seek approval from the elder! It's an important part of your education, was it not?!

CONTINUED: (3)

Nero is unstoppable, ignoring her lecture.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) Don't walk away from me, boy! I'm not finished with you! Nero!

Nero jumps to a halt.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) I don't recall dismissing you! And why am I looking at the back of your head?! Where are your manners?!

Nero makes eye contact.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) I cannot be shunned like a leper! My authority has kept us safe all these years. Removing me will only embolden my opponents in the senate to call for the creation of a republic. If I go, they will burn this place to the ground and you with it. Don't give them the satisfaction.

NERO

I'm not afraid of a fight. How else will I get a chance to prove myself? But don't despair. They won't even know you are gone.

AGRIPPINA Gone? Where am I going?

NERO

Into exile and you will stay there until I have pardoned you.

AGRIPPINA I'm not going anywhere.

NERO Let's make this easy, shall we?

AGRIPPINA And allow myself to become a scapegoat while the actual offender remains at large? NERO I will make the necessary arrangements for your departure.

Nero turns around. Agrippina's eyes enlarge in anger.

She grabs him by his collar before he reaches the door, bludgeons him down to the marble with a single thrust that explodes in his face.

EXT. ROMAN PORT - NIGHT

Sarah is waiting, looking uneasy and tense.

Her beauty stands out among the local MERCHANTS, FISHERMEN and SAILORS conducting their business on and off the many vessels lining the torch-lit harbour.

Sarah keeps an eye out for Messala. A BOATMAN draws her attention to himself from the bow of his vessel.

BOATMAN How much longer, sweetheart? Are you going to make me wait all night?

SARAH Bear with me for just a little while. He will be here soon.

INT. THRONE ROOM - PALACE - ROME - NIGHT

As long as Nero is still sprawled out on the floor Agrippina moves to press her kneecap on his hand to keep him down, prompting him to use his other arm as a shield.

AGRIPPINA

The day I leave Rome to you is the day it ceases to exist. Do not underestimate the ferocity of my resolve. There is plenty more where this came from.

NERO

That's where you and I differ. My hands will never touch the skin of another human being, least of all my family.

Agrippina blasts him in her rage.

AGRIPPINA

I may have overreacted occasionally! So what?! It's only natural to lose your temper when your first born throws himself at the mercy of peasants who could have easily abducted him and no one would have known!

NERO

I've been a prisoner ever since I left your womb.

Agrippina launches another blow to his face.

AGRIPPINA

My conscience is clear! The only regret I have is that time I left you alone to commit suicide. I can still remember the stitches. I remember the day I found you without consciousness, soaked in your own blood. If the surgeons hadn't saved your life you would have thrown it away for your beloved Messala!

(pauses)

How many times did I waste my breath asking you to put him out of your mind?! But you just couldn't let go, could you?! You had to go back to him! If you had just listened to me I wouldn't have to relive the entire thing again! If they had killed him twenty years ago I wouldn't be standing here now screaming my lungs out!

Nero lowers his arm, a reaction to the bombshell she just dropped.

NERO

They?

AGRIPPINA I was told no one could have possibly survived the attack. (MORE) AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) A mass grave was discovered not far from the village that laid my final doubts to rest. He was out of our lives at last.

Nero is appalled to tears.

NERO Marius didn't order the attack on the village. You did. Why?

AGRIPPINA Retribution. I always blamed him for what you did to yourself.

Agrippina rises.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) It appears we have some unfinished business, your friend and I. It may not be too late to settle it and rid myself of him and his companion forever.

Nero grabs her ankle.

NERO

Let him be. I beg you. I don't want him to suffer for our differences. I will do anything you ask.

AGRIPPINA You can start by letting me go!

NERO But first hear me out!

AGRIPPINA

I have heard enough! You can't save him and you can't stop me! Now let me go!

NERO

If I can't stop you the Praetorians will!

Agrippina stops dead, surprised.

CONTINUED: (3)

NERO (CONT'D) I told their commander that if I couldn't make you go quietly, he should arrest you.

Agrippina's body language and the look in her eyes unmask a restless soul locked and loaded on the brink of all-out war.

NERO (CONT'D) Tomorrow I will personally confide our secret accord to the queen. In the eyes of everyone else your absence will be viewed as a long overdue retirement from politics. We shouldn't waste any more time. Let's get you out of here before sunrise. Please, don't resist.

She kicks Nero in the gut with the other leg, ending his hold on her. Nero rolls in pain that deforms his face.

Agrippina kneels to confront him.

AGRIPPINA You will take back that order and tell them you were wrong. This conversation never took place. Not even your wife can know.

NERO

My wife doesn't keep secrets from me like you do. She trusts me not to betray her confidence.

She hits him in the face, hollers.

AGRIPPINA I'm the one who is betrayed! Since when have I become expendable?!

She hits him again, screaming at the top of her lungs.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) I suffered for you, endured the worst hardship and pain and this is what I get?! Is this how you reward my loyalty?!

Nero takes one beating after another.

CONTINUED: (4)

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) You would be nothing without me! Do you hear me?! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!

Agrippina keeps bombarding him with fists and cries of fury and Nero suffers through it.

AGRIPPINA (CONT'D) ... Nothing! Nothing...!

EXT. AGRIPPINA'S SUMMER HOUSE - NIGHT

Sarah parks the wagon at the gate.

INT. AGRIPPINA'S SUMMER HOUSE

The door to the house is already open. Sarah enters.

FIRST FLOOR

Sarah searches the room for Messala.

STAIRCASE

Sarah ascends the enclosed, spiral staircase to the second floor.

CORRIDOR

Sarah runs across.

BED CHAMBER

From the door Sarah looks at a disaster area: Pieces of broken pottery and furniture scattered over the floor.

Torn down drapery and curtains, candle holders and artwork either knocked from their places or smashed.

All indicate there has been a fight.

Sarah takes a walk through.

As she looks around the room she slips on a Roman bronze FIGURINE that brings her face first to the floor.

She cries out in pain.

While her cheek rests flat on the floor her eyes detect a circle shaped OBJECT in front of them.

It's her bracelet. Sarah pushes herself up to sit and then reclaims it, turns it to view all sides until a fresh blood stain rotates into view.

She reacts with anguish, drops the bracelet on the floor, weeps into her palms.

INT. ROYAL CHAMBERS - PALACE - ROME - NIGHT

Nero awakes in his bed. Octavia sits next to him.

NERO Do you ever sleep?

OCTAVIA I might ask you the same thing.

NERO My head is killing me. The pain keeps me up.

Nero sees the PRAETORIAN ESCORT at the door.

NERO (CONT'D) What is he doing here?

OCTAVIA

I'm taking extreme precautions to restore the safety of all individuals at court.

NERO

At least now we know what deprives you of a good night's rest. You fear too much. We have no reason to believe that my life or yours is in immediate danger. Am I right?

She makes a long face.

OCTAVIA

You must come with me at once. A terrible tragedy has occurred.
CREMATION ROOM

In the LIGHT of candles, concealed behind a curtain in the back of the room, a pair of SURGEONS prepare Agrippina's body to be burned.

One of the MEN pulls a shroud over the naked cadaver from feet to chest. They bow as Nero and Octavia turn up through the curtain.

OCTAVIA

Get out!

The surgeons comply. Nero weeps.

NERO

How could this have happened? Why was no one watching her?

OCTAVIA

The Praetorians were patrolling outside the palace walls. By the time they discovered the body it was too late.

NERO You cannot possibly expect me to believe he did this.

OCTAVIA

He killed someone before, remember? I was right not to trust him.

NERO This is the work of a madman, not a friend who opened up to me in his letters like a brother. (as he exits) I need to speak to him.

OUTSIDE CREMATION ROOM

Octavia follows Nero.

OCTAVIA Nero... wait. Where do you think you are going? NERO

I must prove to myself that he is guilty. There is only one way to find out.

OCTAVIA Find out what? We know he did it. He confessed.

NERO I want to hear it from his own lips.

Octavia turns him around to face him.

OCTAVIA

Don't be foolish! Listen to me, you are in no condition to interrogate prisoners. I'm your wife which means I'm the only one you can trust. My words are the only proof you need.

She touches his face.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) We will get through this. Rome's finest and the entire senate will be here tomorrow to pay their respect, many of whom have long supported your mother and in their compassion they will support you as well. All we have to do is show them that in a time of crisis we are fully capable of keeping the situation under control. Trust me. I know what I'm doing. Would I lie to you?

NERO

Never.

INT. PRISON CELL - ROME

Messala gazes at the moon through the bars in the wall.

INT. THRONE ROOM - PALACE - ROME - NIGHT

From her throne Octavia overlooks the sea of MOURNERS talking, drinking and eating among themselves.

CONTINUED:

Nero sits with a blank stare and the trauma-stricken, disturbed face of a child whose thoughts are with his dead mother. Octavia lays her hand on top of his.

Nero makes eye-contact, reading his wife's face which unmistakably says: "I'm there for you."

Across the room one of the GUESTS standing close to the door drops their wine chalice in shock. All heads turn. Sarah has entered the room.

She bleeds through her palms and feet that appear to be selfinflicted wounds. She walks.

The crowd splits in front of her. She leaves bloody footprints on the floor as she passes through.

People exchange looks and whisper. Nero and Octavia rise from their throne.

Sarah falls on her knees before them.

SARAH I'm the one you seek. Let my friend go.

A pair of PRAETORIANS seize Sarah and take her away.

ROYAL CHAMBERS - LATER

Nero marches back into his chambers in anger while two of his SERVANTS help him strip himself of his uniform.

NERO Get me out of this thing!

Octavia enters.

OCTAVIA You two, outside!

The servants exit.

NERO

Explain to me again, what's the point of having personal bodyguards if they can't even stop unwanted guests from trespassing into our home? A Nazarene dragged away under my very nose on this day of national mourning.

CONTINUED:

He takes a seat.

NERO (CONT'D) I can only imagine what all those people must be thinking. "Young, inexperienced, can't keep his own house in order, what hope is there for Rome?"

Octavia goes behind him, puts her hands on his shoulders.

OCTAVIA My hope is that we get no more visits from old friends.

NERO

She is the enemy as far as I'm concerned. The bond we had as children has little impact on how I feel about this double betrayal. That woman... the whole time he was hiding her from me, and this is how I have to find out. I was wrong to let him into my life.

He touches her hand.

NERO (CONT'D) I'm sorry I doubted you. You tried to warn me. I should have listened.

He ponders for a moment.

NERO (CONT'D) Do you think she is behind all this? Commanding him to kill my mother?

OCTAVIA

It did cross my mind. It wouldn't be the first time. But it will most certainly be the last time.

INT. TORTURE CHAMBER - PRISON - NIGHT

Sarah is thrown to the floor by the GUARDS. Pulled to her feet by her hair. She cries out. A punch in the face knocks her down again.

GUARD #1 Where is your savior now?

He kicks her in the stomach. Again she cries out.

GUARD #2 (to Guard #1) Bring her.

He does, places Sarah on a RACK, a wooden torture device with thick rollers at either end as well as in the middle.

Ropes wrapped around the rollers form hand-size loops at the top and bottom of the frame to tie down her wrists and ankles with.

GUARD #2 (CONT'D) Scream for me.

Guard #2 uses a handle to heighten the tension on the ropes and stretch her arms and legs.

Sarah presses her teeth together in pain.

Shuts her eyes tight.

Guard #1 nods at the other who jacks up the tension, further stretches her bones and muscles.

Sarah suffers through it, utters cries of agony.

Guard #2 wrestles the handle to a level at which it can go no further, straining the ropes to the max. Sarah's nightmarish scream shakes the room.

She is tormented to tears, weeps.

Revealing herself from the shadows Octavia brings her mouth down to Sarah's ear from behind, whispers.

OCTAVIA

See? There is no god... no hope... no one to hear your prayers... you are all alone...

The guards untie Sarah, throwing her face-first on the floor.

She scrambles to her knees. Octavia descends to her eye level.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D)

This is the second time I've had to deal with your kind. You brought death to my family. You seduced that poor man to do your bidding, and now you are feeling guilty. Your compassion for him will be your undoing.

Sarah has been mouthing prayers with her eyes closed.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) You are not afraid of death, are you? You people care about the afterlife more than you do about life itself. Spreading lies about some sort of paradise that awaits everyone who opens their heart to an invisible god. The only god. What do they call him?

Sarah is unresponsive, mouthing prayers, eyes shut.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) Tell me, what is the name of your god?

Sarah is lost in prayers. Octavia rises, vacates the room.

One of the guards grabs a thick chain. He wraps one end around his hand, drops the other to dangle above the floor as he towers behind Sarah.

INT. PRISON CELL - NIGHT

Hiding her face under a hood, Aemilia kneels outside Messala's cell. He moves to the bars to talk to her. Both whisper.

MESSALA

Who are you?

She minds her surroundings.

MESSALA (CONT'D) I said "who are you?"

AEMILIA It's not important who I am. I came to inform you that...

CONTINUED:

She is interrupted by the commotion down the corridor. Aemilia returns her attention to Messala after reassuring herself that it's safe to talk.

> AEMILIA (CONT'D) I came to tell you that your friend was arrested trying to help you.

MESSALA

Friend?

AEMILIA The girl. You know of whom I speak.

The reaction on his face confirms it.

MESSALA Where is she?

AEMILIA

Not far from here.

The expression on her face tips him off that something is not right.

MESSALA There is something you are not telling me. What is it?

Aemilia spits it out with hesitation.

AEMILIA She was tortured. Beaten severely. She is not well. I'm sorry.

Aemilia looks away.

AEMILIA (CONT'D) Someone is coming... I have to go.

Messala rises after she does, grabs the bars with both hands, presses his face against them.

MESSALA Wait! Don't go! You haven't told me your name. Who are you?

Aemilia ventures back to him.

CONTINUED: (2)

AEMILIA

Aemilia. My name is Aemilia.

Aemilia steps away from the bars to leave already.

MESSALA Why did you come here? Why do you care?

AEMILIA Because no one else does.

She leaves.

INT. ROYAL CHAMBERS - PALACE - ROME - DAY

Aemilia and Octavia enjoy themselves looking at different types of silk fabrics in a variety of colors spread out in front of them.

OCTAVIA

I handpicked these myself, you know. It's highly sought after.

AEMILIA

Your majesty has impeccable taste.

OCTAVIA

It's all I can do to take my mind off the terrible ordeal we had to go through. After eight months this house is still grieving.

AEMILIA

Indeed it was a trying time for all of us. Thank god, it's over.

Octavia freezes, slowly lifts her unblinking gaze towards Aemilia, her face darkens.

AEMILIA (CONT'D) Are you all right? My lady?

OCTAVIA Which god are you referring to, exactly?

Aemilia is busted and she acts accordingly.

79.

AEMILIA

Pardon?

OCTAVIA You said "Thank god, it's over." What did you mean by that?

Agrippina can see how she struggles to come up with a plausible explanation.

AEMILIA

Well, I...

OCTAVIA

Last time those words were spoken I had just lost my father. Spoken by the same person who killed him. No one talks like that these days because it's not a normal thing to say, so why did you? Maybe you heard it from someone else. Cassandra...

Aemilia shows a reaction, but not apparent enough.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) She was rotting behind bars when she said it, which means you must have been there, were you? Tell me what I want to know. And don't lie to me. Don't you dare lie to me. So? Were you?

AEMILIA (with hesitation) Yes...

Octavia tries to calm herself.

OCTAVIA Why did you go to her?

AEMILIA Because... she was my sister.

Octavia responds with a dark stare of amazement.

OCTAVIA All this time...

Aemilia gets emotional.

I'm sorry... OCTAVIA All this time...

AEMILIA

AEMILIA (pleading) My queen...

Octavia shuts her eyes, shakes her head.

OCTAVIA I trusted you... I trusted you... (opens her eyes.) You deceived me.

AEMILIA Please, don't say that.

OCTAVIA

You spoke to my enemy behind my back. Your own sister. Why weren't you honest with me?

AEMILIA

I couldn't. I was sworn to secrecy.

OCTAVIA

By whom?

Aemilia keeps her eyes down, her lips sealed.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D)

By whom?!

AEMILIA

The queen mother. My sister did not commit murder. She was a victim, as was your father, and they died for no other reason than being in love.

OCTAVIA The queen mother?

AEMILIA She forced me to incriminate Cassandra, saying that she poisoned the emperor. (MORE) CONTINUED: (3)

AEMILIA (CONT'D) In exchange for bearing false witness, her life and that of her unborn love child would be spared.

Octavia looks shocked.

AEMILIA (CONT'D) (in tears) It was a lie. I'm so sorry.

NERO'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Octavia walks into a middle of a conversation between Nero and two SENATORS.

She seems distraught and angry. One look at his wife and Nero motions to the senators to leave. They do so with a bow.

> NERO What's going on? Why do you look at me like that?

OCTAVIA She took my father away from me.

NERO

Who?

OCTAVIA His own wife. She killed him. She killed my father. Did you know it?

It appears he did not.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) Did you know it?!

NERO Restrain yourself, woman!

OCTAVIA Tell me the truth. Tell me what you know.

NERO I know that she loved you like a daughter.

OCTAVIA

I know the truth when I hear it. She made my father pay for his unholy union with that miscreant Cassandra.

NERO

That is a lie.

OCTAVIA

The bastard child they spawned would have succeeded him to the throne some day and you would have been disowned along with your mother. That is why she killed him and that is why she deserved her fate!

That pushes him over the edge. Nero backhands her hard. Octavia drops. Standing over his wife, Nero seethes with rage.

> NERO Is that your way of telling me that you murdered my mother?! Is it?!

Nero rams his foot into her stomach, flipping her over onto her back. Octavia rolls on her side, puts her hand where the pain is. She weeps.

> NERO (CONT'D) It was you the whole time! First you kill my mother and then you make me believe it was my own friend!

Again he plants his foot in her stomach, knocks her over on her back again. Octavia gets back on all fours, clutching her belly, spitting, tears streaming down her face.

> OCTAVIA Please... please, stop...

Nero reaches down and grabs her ears, pulling her up towards himself. She screams. Nero shouts in her face.

NERO You are unworthy! You are unworthy of this house! You are unworthy of me!

CONTINUED: (2)

He shakes her head by the ears.

NERO (CONT'D) You are a butcher like your father was! I loved you! I made you my queen! And you go behind my back and rob me of my mother! I loathe you! I loathe you! Do you hear what I'm saying to you?! (shakes her head) Do you?! Answer me!

Octavia sobs and cries with agonizing pain.

OCTAVIA ... I do...! I do...! Let me go...! I'm begging you...! Please, let me go...! Please...! Please...!

Nero holds on to her ear with one hand, slams her in the face with the other. Octavia crashes down at his feet, drooling, sobbing bitterly.

NERO Did you kill my mother?! OCTAVIA ... I... I... Did you do it?! He kicks her. NERO (CONT'D) Did you?! He kicks her again. Tell me! NERO (CONT'D) Tell me!

... No...! No...! I did not do it...! I did not do it...!

NERO Then who did?! Tell me! Tell me now! CONTINUED: (3)

She drags herself across the floor and away from him. Nero follows and keeps kicking her.

NERO (CONT'D) Say it! Say it! Who was it?! Who killed my mother?! Say it!

Tortured and hammered to a physical and emotional wreck, Octavia shouts out.

OCTAVIA

You did!

Nero stops. Octavia raises her arm to shield herself.

Shakes with fear. Keeps her distance. Nero stares with his mouth hanging open, shocked, frozen. He chokes up teary-eyed.

NERO What are you saying?

Octavia lowers her guard. Nero shakes his head.

NERO (CONT'D) No... no... it can't be...

One look into her eyes and he knows it's true.

OCTAVIA

I'm sorry...

(FLASHBACK) INT. THRONE ROOM - PALACE - ROME - NIGHT

Octavia pushes open the doors to enter.

The horror-stricken look on her face mirrors her gruesome discovery.

On his knees in a pool of blood Nero repeatedly stabs his dead mother in the belly with his dagger sacrificial-style, using both hands. Two PRAETORIANS dash inside, restrain and disarm him.

Nero resists. They forcefully remove him from the scene.

Octavia hovers over the corpse.

(OCTAVIA'S MIND) INT. ROYAL CHAMBERS

Varinia bleeding to death on the floor, reaching out for little Octavia.

INT. THRONE ROOM

Octavia lifts dead Agrippina to a seated position, gazes at her bloodied face. Embraces her.

BACK TO PRESENT

Nero rear-tumbles. Tears flowing.

NERO You lied to me... why...

OCTAVIA

Because I swore an oath. I promised your mother that I would be there for you. That I would protect you, keep you out of harms way. If I lied it's because I was merely trying to save you. Even if that means saving you from yourself.

NERO

Why would you want to save a monster like me? I spilled innocent blood. I condemned a good man, my own friend, to die for a crime that I committed.

OCTAVIA Your friend is alive.

Nero's eyes shift back to her with a question mark on his face.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D)

It was that woman. The other Nazarene. Sarah. She made a deal with me to spare his life. She even renounced her faith in order to save him.

Nero is unresponsive, dull-eyed.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D)

Caesar?

She leans closer.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D)

Caesar?

NERO I wish I had that weapon now.

OCTAVIA Weapon? What weapon? (ponders) You mean...

NERO I should have taken that blade and used it on myself when I still had the chance.

She takes his hand.

OCTAVIA I'm afraid you will never have that chance. You are going to live.

NERO (seems depressed) For what? What have I got to live for?

OCTAVIA

Us...

Overpowered by emotion, Octavia looks genuinely concerned about his welfare. She weeps.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) I love you...

INT. SENATE BUILDING - ROME - DAY

A group of SENATORS talk amongst themselves in a dark room.

Senator Piso leads the discussion.

He excludes himself from his colleagues to receive the CHIEF PRAETORIAN upon his entry and hand him a bag of coins.

SENATOR PISO I trust our bargain will not be forgotten when the hour is upon us.

CHIEF PRAETORIAN You have done your part, we are ready to do ours. We are at your service, my lord.

SENATOR PISO Good. Have your men on standby and wait for my orders. I will see the informant now.

The Chief Praetorian bows, exits. Piso turns to the other senators.

SENATOR PISO (CONT'D) Gentlemen... our time has come. By nightfall we will take over the city. Inform the others. Long live the republic.

OTHER SENATORS Long live the republic.

They exit. The Chief Praetorian returns with Aemilia.

He leaves her with Piso and walks out.

SENATOR PISO You have done well, my dear. On behalf of the entire senate and the people of Rome I thank you. You shall have your prize.

He extends a bag of coins towards her.

AEMILIA I don't want your money.

Piso withdraws his hand, baffled.

AEMILIA (CONT'D) When I first came to you and offered you my assistance it wasn't because of money. I was motivated by my feelings for a relative of mine. Someone who meant more to me than all the riches in the world.

SENATOR PISO

You have been the eyes and ears of the senate for many months now. You risked your life to report on your master's dirty, little secrets and dealings and you want nothing in return?

Aemilia confirms it with her silence.

SENATOR PISO (CONT'D) Then why did you come to me? What do you hope to gain from this?

AEMILIA

Retribution.

INT. MAIDS CHAMBER - PALACE - ROME - NIGHT

Octavia enters, searching.

OCTAVIA (asking herself) Where is Aemilia?

Two of her CHAMBERMAIDS burst in, dragging with them a third MAID against her will.

CHAMBERMAID #1 Your majesty... we are betrayed.

OCTAVIA What is this?! What is going on?!

CHAMBERMAID #1 (refers to maid #3) This one has something important to tell you.

OCTAVIA Tell me what?

CHAMBERMAID #2 That she has been sleeping with a member of the senate who was so drunk one night he disclosed a juicy piece of information. (to chambermaid #3) Tell her what you told us.

They push her forward, closer to Octavia.

OCTAVIA

Well?

CHAMBERMAID #3

It is true what was said about me, your majesty. I bedded a highranking politician whom I overheard saying that the senate devised a secret plan to assassinate the emperor before dawn.

NERO'S OFFICE - LATER

Nero is joined by his wife and a few loyal ADVISERS. Nero stares out of the window while listening to their counsel.

ADVISER #1

... It appears rumors of the looming overthrow are true, your majesty. The senate has greased many hands and bought the loyalty of the Praetorian Guard to secure its power grab.

Unafraid, Nero keeps staring off into the distance without showing the slightest concern.

ADVISER #1 (CONT'D) It's as if their fear of the imperial court has dissipated along with the tragic fate of your mother. Whatever support she had left in the senate is at this point obsolete.

Adviser #1 walks around while speaking.

ADVISER #1 (CONT'D) I wish I could say you can negotiate your way out of this, but... making concessions in order to appease the kind of opposition you are dealing with would be pure wish-thinking. Your only option... is exile.

NERO Exile? Like my mother before me? ADVISER #2 We are deserted, your majesty. This is a fight we can't win. You must decide now. Time is of the essence...

Nero turns away from the window to face his advisers.

NERO Thank you, that will be all.

ADVISER #1

Majesty?

NERO I think the time has come to part ways. My lords... you have served bonorably and with groat

honorably and with great distinction. As of now you are no longer bound by the oath you gave me. I'm hereby relieving you of your duty and bid you good-bye. Thank you.

His advisers glance at each other as a reaction to their swift dismissal. Octavia looks a little surprised herself. Nero returns to the window. The advisers bow.

> ADVISER #1 Good-bye, your majesty.

The advisers leave the room. Octavia shuts the door and marches back to Nero in protest. Nero faces her.

OCTAVIA You could have at least detained them for a little longer. Make them work for us in one capacity or another.

NERO We don't need them. We make our own luck. Prepare to leave.

OCTAVIA In the middle of the day? That is your plan?

NERO Trust me, I know what I'm doing.

OCTAVIA

Do you?

NERO

A secret passage underneath the palace will get us outside the city walls. In the morning when the fire has settled...

OCTAVIA

Fire? What fire?

NERO

I will burn the Senate to the ground for its betrayal. The fire will create a diversion and give us the time we need to escape.

Nero draws a look of disapproval from her.

OCTAVIA

So that's it? You are giving up? As usual you are running away from the problem rather than facing it.

NERO What would you have me do?

OCTAVIA

You can fight.

NERO Fight for what? You heard what he said. It's over.

OCTAVIA Those men don't care about you and me. They can't be trusted, but you can trust me.

NERO I've heard that before.

That gives her a pause.

OCTAVIA

You are not the only one whose life is on the line, you know. I say we fight. Our legions are camped outside of Rome. I will find them and I will march them into the city.

(MORE)

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) The senate won't have a chance. Even the Praetorians are no match against an entire legion. I will return by nightfall, hopefully with an army. I can save us.

She leaves.

ROYAL STABLES

Hooded and cloaked, Octavia is getting ready to mount that horse when Aemilia arrives.

AEMILIA

Your grace...

Octavia freezes.

OCTAVIA

Aemilia.

AEMILIA They told me I might find you here.

Octavia approaches.

OCTAVIA Where were you? I've been looking for you.

AEMILIA

I'm sorry, your grace. I was
needed elsewhere, it couldn't wait.

OCTAVIA And neither can I. We will discuss this later when I come back.

Aemilia grabs her arm.

AEMILIA

Later may be too late. I must speak to you now... about that dream you've been having since childhood... and that mysterious woman... do you remember?

Octavia is not going anywhere. She is all ears.

OCTAVIA

Yes?

AEMILIA There is something you should know.

THE HORIZON

As the sun goes down.

INT. SENATOR PISO'S HOUSE - OUTSIDE OF ROME - NIGHT

Senator Piso answers the POUNDING on his door. It's his panic-stricken SERVANT.

SERVANT Sire, you must come quickly. The situation is catastrophic.

EXT. SENATOR PISO'S HOUSE ROOFTOP

Piso and his servant watch in horror the THICK, GREY CLOUDS of the ever rising SMOKE from the armageddon-like INFERNO that has consumed Rome.

SERVANT No one knows how it started. Our means to contain it are no match against the fire. It's spreading faster and growing stronger by the hour.

SENATOR PISO The people need me. Ready my horse! Now!

The servant runs.

INT. ROYAL TOMB - PALACE

Octavia walks in, looking angry and hurt out of her mind.

She is gunning for her father's sarcophagus that is now closed.

ROYAL CHAMBERS

Nero is staring at a piece of hand-size papyrus.

A MESSENGER is with him.

NERO Why didn't you show me this before?

MESSENGER Forgive me, your majesty, but I have just received it myself.

Nero rolls up the papyrus and hands it to him.

NERO Take this to Seneca. Make sure that he and only he reads it.

The messenger obeys.

EXT. STREETS OF ROME

Entire buildings crashing down in the FIRE. PEOPLE running for their lives, screaming, pushing, tugging, trampling over each other.

Others take on the FLAMES by passing buckets of water along a human chain.

INT. ROYAL TOMB - PALACE

Octavia kneels at her father's sarcophagus, definitely not the same person she was before.

(FLASHBACK) EXT. ROYAL CHAMBERS - PALACE - ROME - DAY

With the curiosity of an innocent child that she is, little Octavia peeks into the royal chambers through the crack of the door.

The two PEOPLE inside are her parents, father Claudius and her mother Varinia. They are engaged in a heated argument.

Little Octavia looks on as the war of words escalates.

Claudius flies into an uncontrollable rage and strikes Varinia down with his iron staff.

Realizing what he has done Claudius drops his staff before fleeing the scene. Octavia enters.

INSIDE

Varinia, fading, reaches for Octavia and vice versa.

95.

Their fingers touch.

BACK TO PRESENT

Octavia stares at the sarcophagus in tears.

OCTAVIA You murdered my mother.

ROYAL CHAMBERS - MOMENTS LATER

Nero has been watching the vast expanse of FIRE from the balcony window. Octavia returns.

OCTAVIA

Nero...

She runs into his arms.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) What is going on? How could the fire get out of control like this?

NERO

I didn't want this to happen. The heat and a strong wind must have done it. It would appear the gods have a few scores of their own to settle.

OCTAVIA It's not too late for us. We can still make it if we run.

He faces her.

NERO Run? What about our legions?

OCTAVIA

We don't need them. We don't need any of this. They lied to me, Nero. To us. They told me my mother died giving birth to me. She was killed by her husband, my own father. All that remains of that monster is me and I hate myself for it. I destroyed thousands of lives as he did. NERO

If there is anyone to blame, it's me. I did it. You are not responsible...

OCTAVIA

But it was my anger, my hate that drove you to it. I'm the monster's daughter. His blood is my blood. And when I die his blood will die with me. Rome deserves better. There is nothing left for us here. Come.

She takes his hand.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) Run away with me, my love. Run away with me.

NERO Before we go I'm issuing a final order.

OCTAVIA What final order?

NERO

The one I'm about to give you. Release all prisoners... all of them. After that I want you to leave the city. Find Seneca. I will meet you at his house.

She reads his face, the face of a man who has embraced death and is not afraid of it.

OCTAVIA

You are lying. (weeps) You are lying...

NERO You will see me again. I promise.

Nero nods at the SERVANTS standing by the door to escort her out of the palace. The servants obey. Octavia refuses to let go of Nero's hand.

OCTAVIA

No... please...

Nero holds her teary gaze while she is slowly being pulled away from him.

NERO

I love you...

Octavia's hand slips through his fingers as she is taken away and out of the room.

EXT. STREETS OF ROME

Senator Piso rides into town.

INT. PRISON CELL

Messala gazes through the bars at the other PRISONERS racing past his cell.

EXT. BALCONY - PALACE

Nero approaches the railing and looks down at the deep.

EXT. STREETS OF ROME

Senator Piso dismounts to help an old WOMAN in need who has tripped and fallen to the pavement.

He sends the lady on her way before the ROOF of a BURNING house collapses on him.

INT. ROYAL CHAMBERS - PALACE

Octavia comes running back, scouring the room for Nero. Her searching gaze halts on the balcony window. She steps out...

ONTO THE BALCONY

Where she finds the love of her life standing on top of the railing and strangely relaxed as the world falls apart before his eyes. His robe billows in the wind.

OCTAVIA Nero... I have come to get you.

She waits for him in vain to reply to her call.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) Please, come down. I need you.

No reaction.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) We can make things right again. Everything. I promise. (weeps) Please, come back to me. I love you.

Nero sends his wife a glare over his shoulder. His eyes delirious, twisted, windows to a dark, battered soul hearing the call of kingdom come.

He sets his sights back on the apocalypse ahead. Spreads his arms.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) What are you doing?

Nero tilts forward. She screams.

OCTAVIA (CONT'D) NOOOOOOOO!!

Nero takes a blind plunge into the abyss. Octavia plummets to her knees, weeps.

After tearing herself apart through the intensity of her grief she calms from exhaustion. Her red, puffy eyes dwell on the empty space above the railing.

EXT. STREETS OF ROME - DAY

The fire has died down. Ash falling from the sky. The streets lined with PEOPLE who have lost their homes and possessions, begging, lamenting, weeping.

Their faces blackened by the smoke.

PRAETORIAN CAVALRY polices the disaster area, and helping hands going around.

The wheel of a CART gets stuck in a crack in the road, causing it to spill a heap of DEAD BODIES.

Messala exits through a door in the wall stretching along a colonnade.

Not knowing the bottom of the door frame is elevated off the ground, he trips and falls.

Pushes himself up, sits back against a column.

Another door opens down the colonnade.

TWO PRISON GUARDS come out of it carrying an INMATE wrapped in a robe. The inmate is lowered to the middle of the walkway, abandoned.

Messala rises, moves down the colonnade.

Kneels by the body.

As he pulls back the hood the severely scarred, black and blue beaten face of his beloved Sarah is unveiled.

With one eye swollen shut, she opens the other one to see him choked up and shocked.

MESSALA Sarah... what... what have they done to you?

He moves his hand to close her robe, reconsiders after catching a brief glimpse of the deformity beneath it.

He opens her robe, exposes her belly and the ugly SCAR and the messy STITCHES that run across it -- indicators of an intrusion into the uterus.

Messala covers his mouth with his wrist in a show of extreme bewilderment.

His face tightens in an effort not to cry. Sarah touches his face.

SARAH No regrets... no regrets... no regrets...

Messala holds her hand, kisses it with his eyes closed.

Sarah's eyelids slowly come together and she passes away. Her lifeless hand rests in his, tipping him off as to her demise. MESSALA Sarah... Sarah... (on the verge of tears) Sarah...

He tries to shake her back into consciousness.

MESSALA (CONT'D) Sarah... stay with me. (weeps) Please, don't go... please... don't leave me... please... no...

Grief takes over and speech-disables him. He sinks his head into her throat, weeps on. Sarah's face turns pale as death, looking cold, weak, calm... at peace.

INT. SENECA'S HOUSE IN THE COUNTRY - NIGHT

Octavia, obviously still shaken by her loss, listens while Seneca speaks.

SENECA Before the great fire your husband had received a message from his enemies who offered him a deal. They told him they wouldn't lay hands on his wife and permit her to keep all her possessions if he took his own life. That was the price of your freedom and the right to live.

Octavia shuts her eyes to release a tear.

EXT. VILLAGE RUINS - DAY

Messala is fixing the shack rooftop that belonged to his family.

His attention is drawn to the FIGURE on horseback in the distance who has apparently been watching him the entire time.

The figure rides down the hill towards him.

Messala drops everything and comes down from atop the shack to meet the stranger that turns out to be Aemilia.

She dismounts, walks up to him. She keeps something concealed underneath her robe.

AEMILIA I don't know if you remember me...

MESSALA I remember you. How did you find me?

AEMILIA I followed you. I'm so sorry for your loss.

MESSALA You came all this way to tell me that?

AEMILIA No. I have something for you.

MESSALA

What?

Aemilia brings out from under her robe a BABY GIRL.

AEMILIA

Your daughter.

The look on Messala's face is one of sheer surprise.

Aemilia places the infant gently in his arms. They share laughs and tears of joy. Messala gazes lovingly into the eyes of his child.

> MESSALA She is beautiful. (to Aemilia) Thank you.

AEMILIA My sister and her infant never lived to see each other. I didn't want the same thing happen to you.

MESSALA Because you care.

AEMILIA No one else does.

MESSALA Thank you. Farewell.

Aemilia smiles. She looks on as Messala returns to the shack with the baby.

INT. SHACK - NIGHT

Messala can't take his eyes off the baby, showering her with love. Their faces bathed in FIRE-LIGHT.

MESSALA You have your mother's eyes.

LATER

Messala lies next to the sleeping baby. He closes his eyes to do the same.

INT. AGRIPPINA'S SUMMER HOUSE - NIGHT (DREAM)

Messala and Sarah lie in bed together.

SARAH ... Remember when we were young?

MESSALA How could I forget?

SARAH I keep thinking about the day before my mother died. We were chasing each other around the field underneath a clear, blue sky and the sun in our faces. What a beautiful day it was.

MESSALA

The best.

EXT. ITALIAN COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

Young Messala, Nero and Sarah play around in a grain field glowing golden in the afternoon sun that's as bright as the smile on their little faces.

END DREAM SEQUENCE

FADE OUT.