

SEVERUS
Episode Six

Story By
Steve Exeter & Mike Lukey

Written by
Steve Exeter

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FADE IN:

FLASHBACK

INT. SYRIAN TEMPLE - 16 YEARS AGO.

A younger Julia Domna lies naked on a dais, her eyes closed and looking as if she is in a light sleep, or some kind of languid half-sleep. She hums a repetitive chant. At first, it seems she is meditating, but we pull back to see a naked man on his knees before her. It is Pescennius Niger.

NIGER

Tell me, witch woman... Is it
madness or prophecy?

Julia is silent for a long moment. Then her eyes open and she speaks in an otherworldly way.

JULIA

I see the coming of the Black
Caesar... In the Year of Five
Emperors, when the blood of the
North is spilled upon frozen
fields...

NIGER

Speak plainly, woman...

JULIA

You came to me to make sense of
your vision... You have performed
the rite. I see a man riding a
white horse, robed in purple. He
is... Not you.

NIGER

What of *my* dream, woman?

JULIA

You dream of gold and glory. Yours
is a small dream. Your dream says
you will have the throne only
through a war of blood, long after
your body has died.

NIGER

Don't toy with me!

Niger turns towards her, angry, looking as if he will strangle her.

JULIA

You have one chance to avoid this
fate, Pescennius Niger.

(MORE)

JULIA (CONT'D)

You must make a covenant with your
most hated enemy.

NIGER

What sort of covenant?

JULIA

I do not know. The Gods do not tell
me plainly. I see black and white
figures commanding armies. I see
snow and death. I clearly see two
black Caesars locked in eternal
combat, tearing at the tapestry
that is Rome, and one... One has
your face.

CUT TO:

INT. EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS - PRESENT, EARLY MORNING

Julia awakens in the dark beside her husband, Severus. We can clearly hear thunder and rain outside. Julia stands and moves to the window. She peers out over Rome, which is being assaulted by a fierce thunderstorm. Torrents of rain pelt the city, and lightning stabs at the distant horizon. Thunder rolls and rumbles towards her.

Julia turns and looks at the sleeping Severus. She has a worried look on her face, and closes her eyes.

JULIA

Gods... Let it be madness.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

EXT. ROMAN STREETS - DAY

We follow behind a hooded figure (CARACALLA) as it walks through the streets. It's clearly male, and we can see by the bare hands that it's a black man. He walks past a market stall selling dates and lightly brushes the edge of the box.

The figure walks on. After a moment, we see the figure's hand raise a date up to the opening in the hood. Now we pan around to the face, one rather similar to Pescennius Niger, as he eats the date.

CUT TO:

INT. SENATE CHAMBER - DAY

Emperor Septimius Severus sits before the assembled Senate, including Renautus, Iago and Corben, as well as several other senators that are clearly new. Men in the garb of the Praetorian Guard stand by the door. Laetus wears the trappings of the Prefect of the Guard. Demetrius stands beside him. Julia sits nearby, looking proud of Severus.

Renautus has a long scroll he is reading off from as he speaks to Severus.

RENAUTUS

Despite the rampant unpopularity of your decision, the increased taxes and massive slashes to military spending have indeed brought Rome's operating budget to an even keel. We project that within only a few months, Rome itself will even turn a small profit.

SEVERUS

Good. Our debts to the investors are paid, interest included?

RENAUTUS

As of this month, Rome is in debt to no one.

SEVERUS

(Smiles)
Good! I'm proud of the work we have all done here. It has been a long, difficult ten years.

IAGO

Of course, Caesar, at your earliest convenience, we may begin lowering the taxes again.

SEVERUS

Of course. However...

At the word 'However' Iago's face falls.

SEVERUS (CONT'D)

In order to prevent another financial disaster, I've devised a strategy that will keep Rome's economy stable.

IAGO

(Slightly wryly)
I long to hear it, great Caesar.

SEVERUS

Fear not, Iago. I know you and other merchants have been suffering under these taxes. But with the debts paid and the Empire stabilised, I believe it is time to move on to the second stage.

RENAUTUS

Second stage? Sir, you neglected to share this 'second stage' with us.

Severus smiles.

SEVERUS

Because you won't like it. I intend to pull Imperial Authority back from the outlying provinces. We will maintain our legions there, but as we ease the taxes, I wish to ease the cost of enforcing those taxes. The free cities will be free again, and Rome will no longer hold the world in the palm of it's hand. We will open our grip and allow the world to live freely.

CORBEN

What?!

The senate erupts in shouts and murmurs. The Praetorians look on edge. We see Laetus glance over at Julia, a look of worry on his face. Severus holds up a hand and the senators quiet some.

SEVERUS

I know this seems foolish at first glance. But when you look at what it costs Rome to maintain the entirety of the Empire, it is actually better for the provinces to self-rule. They will have fewer reasons to rebel, they can maintain their own roads, aqueducts, and government, and all Rome requires is enough tribute to keep the stationed legions active.

IAGO

But surely the loss of revenue... Plus, the loss of control... I mean...

CORBEN

Besides, great Caesar, what of the commerce? If these provinces can raise or lower taxes as they see fit...

(MORE)

CORBEN (CONT'D)

What's to stop them keeping the taxes high? Especially on Roman goods?

SEVERUS

Nothing. But we cannot control all the world. Marcus Aurelius tried, Commodus tried, and many before. No. Rome shall not be the great iron fist. We will provide aid if requested, and we shall keep our borders secure, but we have no business fighting wars where we need not, or telling the men and women in the distant parts of the world how to live their lives. Yes, you all may lose a little more money. So will I. But it is a small price to pay to make Rome what it should be. Not a conquering giant, but the jewel of the Mediterranean.

EXT. ROMAN BATH HOUSE - LATER

Corben and Iago sit while being tended by slaves. They are fed fruit and wine while Iago sits there looking angry.

IAGO

No good will come of this.

CORBEN

No good has come of anything in the Emperor's rule. But the man cannot be killed! His damned soothsayer wife sees assassins from miles away and his Praetorian Guards are all old friends from his war days.

IAGO

True, but I happen to know that they are not flawlessly loyal. Even still... I think we shall need to take great steps to prevent Caesar's breakup of the Empire.

CORBEN

Oh, I agree. First he has us paying half of our profits in taxes, now he will ease that burden and replace it with more. I've had to sell my Corsican Villa just to hold onto my sailing vessels.

IAGO

Damnably black fool. He shall make Rome weak, and bankrupt us all doing it. There must be a way to stop this.

CORBEN

I have a thought about that.

IAGO

That must have been painful, Corben. I thought perhaps that was steam from the bath, but I guess it was smoke coming from your ears.

CORBEN

He has slashes military spending. What if there's a war?

IAGO

A war? Against who? The Emperor has crushed the Saxons, driven the Moors to near total defeat, and negotiated peace with everyone else.

CORBEN

Yes. Even his former rivals.

Iago frowns at Corben.

IAGO

Good Gods, you did have an idea.

CORBEN

I happen to know that Pescennius Niger still lusts after the Emperor's chair. I do believe we could leverage that.

IAGO

Bah! Niger... Just what we need, a second African right after the first. Besides, reigniting that conflict would do nothing but send Severus back into battle where he would surely just emerge victorious, *again*.

CORBEN

Maybe not. I have never fought in a war, but I do know that usually people die in it.

IAGO

Septimius Severus survived the Moors, Saxons, Praetorian assassins, and Roman politics!

(MORE)

IAGO (CONT'D)

Unless you happen to have lightning bolts hidden up your ass, I'd advise you stop taxing that meagre intellect before you set fire to your hair.

Corben laughs and gulps down some wine.

CORBEN

All good points, my friend. But if we do nothing, remember who will inherit that throne even if Severus does die.

IAGO

Don't remind me. The only thing more unpredictable than him is his hood-wearing, thief of a son. Gods help us, it will be Commodus all over again.

CORBEN

So... given our options...

IAGO

Ugh. Yes.

Iago looks down at one of the slaves who is filling his wine cup, a young SLAVE of African descent. He frowns at her for a long moment, then turns back to Corben.

IAGO (CONT'D)

(Thoughtfully)
Yes. Yes, Niger. He is a fool, but a useful one. I will send a dispatch immediately, slip him some denarius and watch him spin his ludicrous plans. Perhaps we'll get lucky and he'll succeed. Even the mighty Emperor surely must bleed eventually.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROMAN STREETS, LARGE MARKET SQUARE - DAY

The square has a small clearing in it with some manicured grass and shrubbery. There is a beautiful fountain in the centre. A young man (GETA, 14, much like a young Severus in appearance,) stands before a group of other young men, with one older man (BRUTUS) sitting there watching intently. Geta appears to be making some sort of speech, and just finishing.

GETA

If the most powerful of men choose to do harm to others, who can oppose them?

(MORE)

GETA (CONT'D)

It is a myth that our leaders are infallible, that they are beyond reproach. When a powerful man does terrible things, it is the duty of every citizen, and every moral man, to expose these terrible things. Otherwise, the powerful tyrant remains unopposed. So yes, Emperors must be questioned, must be watched, and if they prove to be dangerous to their fellow men, removed.

BRUTUS

And if that man is your father?

Geta turns to Brutus, unaffected by the question.

GETA

Especially if that man is my father.

Brutus smiles and nods.

BRUTUS

Excellent. I award the point to Geta.

The other young men react with little surprise, but a few seem genuinely pleased at the decision.

CUT TO:

INT. PALACE, GREAT HALL - LATER

Julia Domna sits with an unfurled scroll that appears to have a calendar layout upon it. There is the sound of footsteps. She hears them, and rolls her scroll up. Laetus enters the Great Hall and salutes her.

LAETUS

Hail Caesar.

JULIA

(Smiling warmly)
Laetus, you need not do that for me. We have known each other now for many years, since my children were still infants.

LAETUS

As you say. However, I must maintain an example for my men to show the proper respect.

JULIA

I don't see any of your men here now.

Laetus smiles, stepping closer to Julia.

JULIA (CONT'D)

What is your purpose here?

Laetus halts and nods to her.

LAETUS

Great Empress, there is a slave that seeks an audience with you. She bears a necklace with a symbol upon it.

JULIA

Ah, yes. Please, you may send her to me, and tell no one of the meeting.

LAETUS

Several guards know.

JULIA

Then make them keep the secret or kill them.

Laetus looks stunned.

JULIA (CONT'D)

Is there a problem, Prefect?

LAETUS

No, my Empress. I am merely concerned for your safety in what is clearly a covert meeting with a spy.

JULIA

Laetus, I have killed Praetorians before, a slave girl will present no threat to me.

Laetus smiles, an obvious admiration in the expression.

LAETUS

As you command, I obey.

He turns and exits the chamber. After a moment, the SLAVE girl from the bathhouse enters the chamber. She holds up a medallion with a symbol on it: A warrior woman with a sword in one hand and a head in the other.

SLAVE

Praise to Anat, high priestess.

JULIA

Praise be. Now, child... Tell me why you have come here so brazenly.

SLAVE

You were right, holy one. The Senators plot against you.

CUT TO:

INT. PALACE, EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS - DAY

Severus is poring over many documents at a desk. He drops a scroll and bends down to pick it up. We briefly see from his perspective as he looks down at his bare shin. There is only a slight hint of a scar still there. He stands up fully just as Geta enters the room. Severus straightens up and looks at him.

GETA

Good morning, father.

SEVERUS

Don't you mean, 'Hail Caesar?'

GETA

I thought you hated that?

SEVERUS

I do. But I do so want my sons to respect me.

GETA

Oh, I respect you, father. I'll even kiss your ring if the Senate is watching.
(Grins) But when they're not, you can kiss my-

SEVERUS

Careful... I can still best you with a blade.

They laugh and Geta walks up beside his father, handing him a piece of parchment.

SEVERUS (CONT'D)

What's this?

GETA

Another note from my instructor.

SEVERUS

Again?

GETA

Read it...

Severus looks down at it. After a moment his eyes light up.

SEVERUS

This is excellent. He says you have a gift for logic and philosophy.

GETA

Yes. I think it skips a generation.

From the other end of the room, Julia enters and smiles warmly.

JULIA

Two of my three favourite people. Where is Marcus?

GETA

Do you mean Lucius? Or Caracalla?

Severus rolls his eyes.

SEVERUS

Most likely he is lurking somewhere in the city hoping no one recognises him.

JULIA

How did the senate meeting go?

SEVERUS

I don't have your gift of foresight, my love, but I suspect they will be tremendously unhappy and plot against me.

JULIA

Oh, Severus. I do hope at some point we can enjoy a nice, boring, uneventful life.

She puts her arms around Severus and kisses him.

SEVERUS

It would be a nice change of pace. But I would still look for assassins beneath every grain of sand.

GETA

And eventually, you'd find them.

Enter Caracalla, pulling his hood down and looking intensely at Severus.

CARACALLA

Father.

SEVERUS

Marcus.

CARACALLA

That's not my name.

SEVERUS

It's no longer Lucius, and I refuse to call you whatever silly name you are trying to call yourself.

CARACALLA

I choose not to be known by the name of a dead man.

SEVERUS

Marcus Aurelius was one of the greatest Emperor's of Rome. I am hoping beyond hope that you will prove worthy of that moniker.

GETA

Plus it keeps the old corpse's family happy, right? Just like when you deified Commodus?

Severus winces.

SEVERUS

Please don't say that name again.

JULIA

My boys, don't fight. You should be proud. If all goes well, Marcus will inherit the throne.

GETA

And then *he* can fend off assassins.

CARACALLA

It won't be the first time. Father, please... I have heard disturbing rumours. Did you tell the Senate that you will be breaking apart the Empire?

SEVERUS

As always, my son, life is far more complicated than that. I am restoring a Republic. There is a distinct and important difference.

CARACALLA

And that is the legacy you leave for me?

SEVERUS

My son, I have taught you many things. I only pray some day you will listen to the most important lesson I continue to fail to convey. Being Emperor is not a path to glory, it is a burden for the strong and wise.

CARACALLA

I must go.

SEVERUS

Must you? I believe we have many things to discuss. Especially since you didn't meet your tutor, and you have neglected your fighting practice.

CARACALLA

No. I haven't.

Caracalla leaves. Geta shrugs helplessly.

GETA

He'll be sulking for hours. I'd better go get to work.

Geta also exits, leaving Severus looking weary while Julia massages his shoulders.

JULIA

They are young.

SEVERUS

I should learn from my father. I should have the younger instruct the older.

JULIA

How did that turn out?

Severus smiles wryly.

SEVERUS

Not well.

JULIA

Our boys are very different. Marcus has your fire and passion. Geta has your wisdom and patience.

SEVERUS

(Smiles)
And you have my heart.

JULIA

It took me time enough to earn it.

SEVERUS

Can you blame me? You arrived in Rome and told me you bore my child and we were somehow already married. I know very few people who would react well to that. I felt used.

JULIA

You were used. But I also saw the greatness in your eyes. And I saw the man of my dreams was haunted, surrounded by death. I could only feel love for you, and hope someday you could feel it for me.

SEVERUS

(Chuckles)

I think it was on the road to Germania when I first felt it. You were speaking in your strange priestess riddle-speak, and I was infuriated. I'd accused you of conspiring with my enemies or some such thing. I questioned the parentage of our son.

JULIA

I remember.

SEVERUS

I threatened you, and you did not even flinch. Here I am, commander of a legion, I could have commanded the slaughter of you and your family. You stared right back at me and challenged me. I could not help but respect you then.

JULIA

One cannot have love without respect.

SEVERUS

Unless one is a child.

He looks back at the door where his children have departed and shakes his head. Julia takes his hand and smiles. She leads him from his desk over towards the bed.

CUT TO:

INT. SENATE CHAMBER - LATER

Caracalla sits and looks impatient as Renautus reads over a scroll.

RENAUTUS
You can't be serious.

CARACALLA
I am as serious as a blade.

RENAUTUS
Where did you get the coin for
this?

CARACALLA
Does it matter?

RENAUTUS
I'm just curious.

CARACALLA
You learn a lot about Rome by
watching people from the shadows.

RENAUTUS
I'll bet you do.

CARACALLA
It is more reliable than my
mother's slave gossip.

Ranautus rolls up the scroll and hands it back to Caracalla.

RENAUTUS
No. If you wish to go kill your
father's rivals, do so with your
own army. The senate will never
authorise a military strike on a
former senator. Think of the
precedent.

CARACALLA
Niger must die.

RENAUTUS
Your father is Emperor. If he
wishes Niger dead, you can ask him
for the privilege.

CARACALLA
My father is old and weak.

RENAUTUS
(Laughs)
Severus is not as young as he was,
but the man has fought battles that
would make your testicles drop all
over again, boy.

CARACALLA
You will learn to respect me.

RENAUTUS
I sincerely hope so.

Caracalla pulls up his hood and walks out of the room.

CUT TO:

INT. ASTROLOGERS OBSERVATORY - EVENING

An old man (ASTROLOGER) sits with a deep frown on his face as he works with a quill over parchment. There is a knock at the door of the chamber. He sighs and puts his quill down. He stands, going to answer the door.

ASTROLOGER
Who dares disturb my work?!

He opens the door, and there stands Julia with a hood and cloak on.

ASTROLOGER (CONT'D)
Oh, it is you, Empress.

JULIA
I need your council.

ASTROLOGER
It is late. However, I believe I know why you are here.

JULIA
Something is very wrong.

CUT TO:

INT. ASTROLOGERS OBSERVATORY - MINUTES LATER

The Astrologer pores over a scroll while Julia sits there, clearly distressed.

JULIA
I tell you, it isn't right. My son is rash, arrogant, foolish, and completely unlike the man he should be.

ASTROLOGER
He is yet to become the man he should be. He is between boy and man, too young to be wise.

JULIA
I wish you to check the information again. Check his stars. I know he is destined for greatness, but he walks the path of a rogue.

ASTROLOGER

If it pleases you, I shall re-check my work.

JULIA

That is all I ask. I have had terrible dreams. I fear my son may be deceiving me.

ASTROLOGER

Well, we shall see. No one can hide who they are from the stars themselves.

CUT TO:

INT. EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS - DAYS LATER

Severus sits comfortably with a cup of wine in his hand. It is quiet, and he seems to be enjoying the moment of blissful inaction.

Julia sweeps through the door. She sees him sitting there and chews her lip, clearly in indecision.

JULIA

My love...

SEVERUS

Ah, nearly an hour. A new record.

JULIA

I have been thinking it might be good for us to leave Rome for a time.

SEVERUS

Oh yes?

JULIA

I know of a wonderfully relaxing place in Macedonia.

SEVERUS

Macedonia? I received word this morning that your old friend Pescennius Niger loads vessels with soldiers for Rome.

JULIA

Just like in my vision...

SEVERUS

I cannot leave Rome now while an enemy prepares to come meet me. I would be seen as a coward.

JULIA

Will you go fight him?

SEVERUS

I have sent Niger an offer for peace. It is generous. He may accept it.

JULIA

Then, it is handled?

SEVERUS

No. But violence is the first resort of the fool, and the last resort of the wise.

JULIA

Marcus Aurelius?

SEVERUS

Me.

JULIA

Then at least let me get our children out of harms way.

SEVERUS

Julia... Why do you want to go to Macedonia? What are you up to?

JULIA

I thought some quiet would be good for you.

SEVERUS

(Smiles)
Liar.

JULIA

Very well... Then I do not wish to see that fool at all unless you plan to put his head on a spear. Better?

SEVERUS

Yes. You may go to Macedonia, but with guards.

JULIA

Guards?

SEVERUS

I'll not make it *that* easy for my enemies to threaten my family.

JULIA

We can take care of ourselves.

SEVERUS

I also don't want you or Marcus starting a war that does not need to be started.

JULIA

I would never-

SEVERUS

Yes, you would. In the span of a heartbeat.

Severus raises his hand and rings a bell. Julia looks slightly irritated. A moment later, Laetus enters the room.

LAETUS

Hail, Caesar.

SEVERUS

Laetus, my wife wishes to go to Macedonia. Make the necessary arrangements and keep her and my sons out of trouble.

LAETUS

Yes, Caesar.

Laetus salutes and slowly turns. As he does, his eyes drink in Julia's form. Julia notices this, but says nothing.

SEVERUS

Satisfied?

JULIA

Yes. Yes, that will do.

CUT TO:

INT. COLISEUM, STANDS - DAY

Iago walks through a large, empty coliseum. Absolutely no one is there, not even any workers or slaves. Corben steps into view, looking around in confusion, but then hurries over to Iago and falls into step with him.

IAGO

Good! I'm glad you made it.

CORBEN

Why are we meeting here?

IAGO

Because here, no one will overhear us.

CORBEN

You're being paranoid.

IAGO

I have it on good authority that the Empress has a network of slave-spies.

CORBEN

What?

IAGO

Yes. A trick once used by the mad Commodus. Of course, had he treated his slaves better, they might have warned him he was going to be killed.

CORBEN

I thought Commodus drowned with one of his, um...

IAGO

(Smiles condescendingly)
Corben, you are a dear friend to me. You are also horribly naive. And your voice grates, so be silent and listen.

CORBEN

What?

IAGO

Our beloved Empress leaves for Macedonia with a contingent of Praetorian Guard.

CORBEN

Macedonia?

IAGO

Yes. I want you to contact your friends in Macedonia to keep an eye on her activity there.

CORBEN

I don't understand.

IAGO

Then you must live a very relaxing lifestyle, free of complex thought. Trust me. We will straighten this mess out before the African savages conquer Rome entirely.

CUT TO:

INT. EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS - LATER

Severus sits with Renautus going over various parchments and scrolls. Severus looks weary, but also somewhat amused. Renautus is sealing a scroll with the Imperial seal.

RENAUTUS

Do you believe he will accept?

SEVERUS

I hope so. I just finished cleaning up the mess of the previous four Emperors, I don't need to be usurped by some merchant with a personal vendetta.

RENAUTUS

Did he not kiss your ring?

SEVERUS

At the cost of his pride. Now that his pride has been shattered, he will not stop until he stabs us all with the shards.

Renautus pauses, as if reluctant to bring up his next point.

RENAUTUS

Your son approached me recently.

SEVERUS

Oh yes?

RENAUTUS

He wanted the Senate to back him on a secret mission to kill Niger.

Severus considers this for a moment, obviously disturbed by the news.

SEVERUS

How strange. When was this?

RENAUTUS

Just before your proclamation about the 'second stage' went out.

Severus sighs and stands up, pacing lightly.

SEVERUS

These rumbles are portents of distant thunder.

RENAUTUS

I don't understand.

SEVERUS

Over a decade of Roman politics has given me a sixth sense as great as my wife's. Something is happening in the shadows of Rome.

RENAUTUS

If that is true, your son may be involved.

SEVERUS

And Rome would be all the lesser for it. Keep me informed on Niger's movements. I want to know where he is at all times.

RENAUTUS

Yes, Caesar.

SEVERUS

Hopefully Laetus will keep an eye on my rebellious son.

RENAUTUS

I find it... Disturbing that your wife wishes to leave Rome and journey to Macedonia at this time.

SEVERUS

Oh yes?

RENAUTUS

It would be no trouble at all for Niger's people to intercept her, even with Praetorian Guards around her.

SEVERUS

My wife and Niger have a... strange history. But it is precisely that which makes me trust her.

RENAUTUS

So you are not concerned?

SEVERUS

I didn't say that. I just said that I trust her.

RENAUTUS

And Niger?

SEVERUS

I trust that if he does something so foolish, my wife will make him regret it.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROMAN VESSEL, OPEN SEA - LATER

Julia looks out over the water with a strange smile.
Caracalla steps up next to her.

CARACALLA

Mother... I know why we are making
this trip.

JULIA

You know... the first time I saw
the open sea, I was a girl. I was
on my way to your great-
grandfather's estate, where we are
going now. I thought we had sailed
around the whole world. I did not
know how large the world was then.

CARACALLA

Mother, you babble.

JULIA

So do you, my son. Tell me, what
troubles you?

CARACALLA

You've arranged to meet him.

JULIA

Did you hear that from your shadows
and whispers?

CARACALLA

You plan to kill him, don't you?

JULIA

My plans are not your concern, nor
your fathers. He would worry too
much. Worse yet, he would try to
stop me from doing that is
necessary.

CARACALLA

On that we agree. Father is a fool
if he believes we can hide from our
enemies behind a wall of soldiers.

JULIA

Your father has spent more years at
war than you have spent alive in
this world.

CARACALLA

But he would willingly surrender
money, power, and dignity to keep a
fragile peace.

JULIA

Yes, he would. And I would risk your father's wrath to save him from his own wishful thinking. I know this man, Niger. I knew him back when I was training to become high priestess, before I met your father.

CARACALLA

So you know he will refuse father's offer.

JULIA

I know we shall not give him the chance. But you, my sweet Marcus, shall not have any part of it.

CARACALLA

Mother! How can you-

JULIA

If I commit a crime to save my husband, and Rome, then I alone suffer the consequences. But if you take part, it will stain you, and you may never sit on the throne.

Caracalla looks angry, but seems to understand her reasoning.

CARACALLA

Don't call me Marcus.

JULIA

Then do not seek bloodshed when it is unnecessary.

Caracalla shakes his head and walks away. Julia looks sadly out across the water.

CUT TO:

EXT. SYRIAN VESSEL, OPEN SEA - SIMULTANEOUS

Establishing shot.

CUT TO:

INT. SYRIAN VESSEL, OPEN SEA - SIMULTANEOUS

Pescennius Niger sits in a very large, well furnished cabin. He smiles as he tosses a scroll onto a nearby desk and stares into the distance, seemingly lost in thought. He has a cup of wine and takes a generous sip. We pan over to the scroll, which comes unfurled slightly revealing latin writing.

JULIA (V.O.)

Sweet Pescennius, I have had a terrible vision. It is of a secret matter, and we must meet to discuss it immediately. Come meet me, in Struga, Macedonia. My family has a small estate there on the water. I cannot stress the importance of the secrecy of this meeting. My husband does not know of it, but I do not wish for the most important men in my life to kill each other.

There is a knock on the door. Pescennius is shaken from his reverie.

NIGER

Come in.

The door opens and a tall, thin black man in fine clothes steps into the cabin. He is ASELLIUS, and he wears a look of deep concern.

ASELLIUS

My friend.

NIGER

Asellius! Good, I wanted to speak with you before we made port. Wine?

ASELLIUS

No, thank you.

NIGER

Perhaps Ouzo?

ASELLIUS

What is that?

NIGER

I don't know, but it gives me a powerful headache the morning after. What can I do for you?

ASELLIUS

I've been tallying the numbers as you requested.

NIGER

Yes?

ASELLIUS

Even with some truly generous rounding, Severus's forces outnumber yours by a factor of ten.

NIGER

But not in Rome, itself. His legions are scattered.

ASELLIUS

No. Instead, in Rome, he has the Praetorian Guard and intimate knowledge of the terrain. I don't believe a military strike is wise.

NIGER

My friend, I asked you to assemble every able-bodied fighter, soldier, mercenary, cut-throat and killer you could find for this army. You govern all of Syria, surely you could form at least one legion.

ASELLIUS

I have assembled three. However, they are not disciplined like the Roman legion. They are not battle-tested like the Praetorian Guard. They are not familiar with Rome, and many of them only fight if they can strike from the shadows and hide afterwards.

Niger looks dour, and turns to Asellius with a dark look in his eyes.

NIGER

You promised me an army.

ASELLIUS

And you have one. But it's not going to seize Rome unless you have a significant tactical advantage.

NIGER

Oh, that I will have, I assure you. I'm going to meet her now.

ASELLIUS

The witch?

NIGER

The same.

ASELLIUS

You would threaten the Emperor's family?

NIGER

If necessary. Why?

ASELLIUS

Apparently you did not hear what happened to the last man who did that.

NIGER

What are you talking about?

ASELLIUS

Julia Domna and her oldest son killed him with his own sword before her husband could enact vengeance for the threat.

NIGER

Oh, fear not. She will not harm me. She cares deeply for me. Julia Domna and I have known each other for a long time. She will have me in her bed within an hour, and I will have her husband's surrender within the week. And if not, we launch the fleet from Tyre and I'll be wearing purple by the end of the month.

Asellius looks skeptical, but Niger chuckles and sips his wine.

CUT TO:

EXT. DOMNA ESTATE, STRUGA, MACEDONIA - ONE WEEK LATER

Establishing shot of a beautiful Greek estate, very old, but well kept. There are flowers blooming all over the green property. Julia stands outside as a large carriage, escorted by armed men, approaches the house. Several Praetorian Guards, including Laetus, stand there waiting. Caracalla and Geta are also there. Caracalla looks tense, while Geta seems confused and worried.

LAETUS

Are you sure about this, Empress?

JULIA

Completely.

The carriage opens and Pescennius Niger steps out. He approaches Julia, and Geta looks shocked.

GETA

(Whispering)
Mother...

JULIA

Hush.
 (To Niger)
 Pescennius Niger, my old friend.

NIGER

Julia, flower of the gods, how have you been?

JULIA

Quite well. I would like to introduce my sons, Caracalla and Geta.

Niger looks at them, but stops and stares at Caracalla for a long moment.

NIGER

It is a pleasure to meet you.

Caracalla nods, but does not speak.

JULIA

My sons, would you please excuse us? We have much to discuss.

Caracalla nods and stalks away. Geta turns to Julia.

GETA

Mother, is this wise?

JULIA

I'll have the guards with me, but I won't need them. I am perfectly safe with this man.

Geta does not look convinced, but Julia begins walking towards the house, Niger taking her arm and walking with her. Geta turns to follow after his brother, but Caracalla is nowhere to be seen. He turns back, and Laetus, too, is gone.

CUT TO:

INT. DOMNA ESTATE, BEDROOM - LATER

Julia drops her clothes to the floor and turns to Niger with a smile.

JULIA

I have missed you.

NIGER

And yet, I recall, you stayed by your husband's side instead of accepting my offer.

JULIA
I could not leave my husband then.

NIGER
And now?

JULIA
Now... Now I offer you an opportunity.

NIGER
Oh?

JULIA
There are better ways to become Emperor than war.

NIGER
Ah... Like marrying the Empress...

JULIA
Yes, once the Emperor is dead.

Niger laughs heartily and takes his clothes off.

NIGER
I have to know, what terrible sin has your husband committed to earn your murderous wrath?

JULIA
Let is not speak of it. Let us speak of happier things.

NIGER
Such as?

Julia smiles and climbs into the bed. She turns around and smiles up at him. She makes a gesture to her naked body. Niger smiles and steps forward, his clothes dropping to the floor. He climbs above her and begins to kiss the skin of her bare breasts.

Niger is smiling like the cat who caught the canary. Julia licks her lips seductively.

CUT TO:

INT. DOMNA ESTATE, BEDROOM - LATER

Niger is on top of Julia, thrusting, grunting, and Julia appears to be revelling in it. We pan around to see a dark figure hovering behind Niger. Julia sees Niger's discarded cloak nearby. She seizes it and throws it around his neck. At first he seems pleased, but then she twists it and pulls, beginning to strangle him.

The dark figure seizes Niger from behind, and holds him still while Julia continues to strangle him. Niger struggles, but he sees he has no chance of escaping. He looks Julia in the eye and speaks, struggling to get his voice out through the strangling.

NIGER

I... still... have... the...
throne.

Soon his eyes roll up in the back of his head. Once he stops moving, Julia slithers away and pulls her clothes on. The dark figure drops Niger, and steps forward, revealing that it is Laetus, but not in his Praetorian armour. He is still wearing his sword at his side.

JULIA

Finally.

LAETUS

Yes. Now we can focus on the
problem of your husband.

JULIA

In time.

LAETUS

You promised-

JULIA

Shut your mouth, Praetorian! You
will do as your Empress commands.

Laetus falls silent, but nods.

JULIA (CONT'D)

Make sure his guards are dead, then
throw the bodies into the sea. I
wish to be rid of the stink of that
man.

LAETUS

Yes, Empress.

Laetus slips away into the shadows and is gone. Julia steps away as well and we hear splashing water as if she is getting into a bath. We see another figure move in the dark, a hooded figure. It steps forward, and we pan around to see the shocked look that Niger wore as he died.

CUT TO:

EXT. BEACH - LATER

Laetus and the Praetorian Guards are tying heavy stones to the legs of many dead men. One by one, they are hurled into the water and sink.

Laetus looks down on the body of Niger, and with a flash of anger, takes out his sword and runs it through the dead man's eye-socket. He then nods to his men who seize Niger's body and approach the water with it.

FADE TO:

INT. PALACE, EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS - WEEKS LATER

Sitting at his desk, Severus looks impatient. A single piece of parchment sits there before him. Renautus stands there, looking grim. In the corner of the room, Geta is reading and ignoring them. Caracalla seems to be playing with a dagger, and appears unsettled.

SEVERUS

I'm not angry with you.

RENAUTUS

I would hope not.

SEVERUS

Has word of this... discovery reached anyone else?

RENAUTUS

I suspect all of Niger's forces have heard. His chief advisor, a man of some nobility named Asellius, sent the Senate a message claiming he intends to disband Niger's forces.

SEVERUS

Well then... That loose end seems to have tied itself most efficiently.

RENAUTUS

People already suspect your involvement.

SEVERUS

I'm certain they do. I would suspect me as well. Do we know where Niger was when he...

RENAUTUS

My best informants say he departed for some secret meeting, but he would not say where.

SEVERUS

I see.

There is a long pause. Severus seems to be lost in thought.

SEVERUS (CONT'D)

I can assure you, and you can assure the senate, that I did not order Niger killed. I would think after all this time, you would know me better than that.

RENAUTUS

Of course, sir. But the question remains, if he is dead, where is he?

Severus says nothing. He turns to look at Caracalla and Geta. Caracalla has approached Geta, and they seem to be having some small squabble. Their voices are indistinct. Severus turns back to Renautus.

SEVERUS

You may go.

RENAUTUS

Yes, Caesar. But... if I might ask one more question?

SEVERUS

Quickly.

RENAUTUS

With Niger no longer a threat, do you still intend to keep your promise for Albinus to co-rule with you?

SEVERUS

I cannot say. Now, please...

He stands and turns to his sons, who are now beginning to shout at each other. Renautus turns and quickly leaves.

GETA

You've torn it! This was from the library!

CARACALLA

How can you be so blind?!

Severus puts a hand on Caracalla's shoulder. The boy turns and swings at Severus, but Severus sees it coming and dodges. He then pulls his son off his feet with the momentum and watches him fall to the floor.

SEVERUS

Marcus Aurelius! What madness is this? Why do you harass your brother so?

CARACALLA

My brother is a fool!

SEVERUS

Even if that were true, explain how striking him will improve that?!

Caracalla gets to his feet angrily.

SEVERUS (CONT'D)

Geta, please leave us. I must speak to your brother alone.

Geta stands, nodding to his father. He then turns and walks out the doorway. Severus turns back to his oldest son.

SEVERUS (CONT'D)

I have questions that you can answer. And you will answer. If you attempt to evade the question, I will beat you to within an inch of your life.

Caracalla looks shocked.

CARACALLA

What?!

SEVERUS

I am being kind, boy! I am within my right to have your head for conspiracy.

CARACALLA

Father!

SEVERUS

Your mother took you to Macedonia. Pescennius Niger has gone missing during the same time.

Caracalla looks scared, but tries to hide it. Severus can see from his reaction that he is hiding something.

SEVERUS (CONT'D)

You do know something.

CARACALLA

I know many things!

SEVERUS

Boy, this is no longer about your stubbornness. The fate of the entire Empire is at stake! Tell me truthfully, did you kill Niger?!

Caracalla puts on a tight-lipped smile.

CARACALLA

No.

SEVERUS

Your mother?

Caracalla's expression falters. Severus nods and points a finger under Caracalla's nose.

SEVERUS (CONT'D)

I had intended for you to succeed me as Emperor. But if you lie to me now-

CARACALLA

I do not lie!

SEVERUS

You conceal the truth!

CARACALLA

If you want the truth, ask mother! I think she knows more truths than you would care to learn!

Severus slaps Caracalla, who seems genuinely surprised.

SEVERUS

We are finished.

CUT TO:

INT. ASTROLOGERS OBSERVATORY - EVENING

Julia sits while the Astrologer sips some tea. He has a wide smile on his face as if he knows something.

JULIA

Why do you smile so?

ASTROLOGER

I found an error in my calculations.

JULIA

I thought as much.

ASTROLOGER

Oh, you don't know the half of it. Your son, Marcus Aurelius, you say he was born weeks early.

JULIA

Yes. That was factored in, yes?

ASTROLOGER

Yes, but tell me... was he a small infant? Undersized?

JULIA

No.

The Astrologer laughs.

JULIA (CONT'D)

What is going on?

ASTROLOGER

Your son was born slightly late.

JULIA

What? No, that is nonsense.

ASTROLOGER

I have been very thorough. While the stars on the day of his birth are perfectly aligned, there is a strange anomaly in the day he was conceived.

JULIA

What anomaly?

ASTROLOGER

If he was conceived, say, a month earlier, it paints a very different picture. It paints a picture of the brash, undisciplined rogue, favoured by Mercury and resentful of the sun. Much more in-line with who he really is, wouldn't you say?

Julia gets a dark, determined look on her face.

JULIA

Who have you spoken to about this?

ASTROLOGER

No one. I would not lose my head by spreading pure speculation about our Caesar's child. If...

JULIA

Stop speaking.

Julia stands, looking infuriated.

CUT TO:

INT. PALACE, EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS - LATER

Julia enters the chambers. It is pitch dark, but as she slips inside, still looking angry, the light appears to rise. We pan around to see Severus standing there with a torch. He uses it to light a small brazier so they can see and speak.

SEVERUS
You have been busy, wife.

Julia nods and begins to disrobe.

JULIA
Yes, and now I wish to sleep.

SEVERUS
You have often been untruthful with me, but I have come to know that you do what you do to help and protect me. I know you will never act against me, not intentionally. But now, now I must demand the truth.

JULIA
Severus-

SEVERUS
Did you kill Niger?

Julia looks him squarely in the eye.

JULIA
Yes.

Severus nods, obviously holding in his hanger.

SEVERUS
You have done irreparable harm.

JULIA
You would have wasted time offering him trinkets while he looked for a good place to stick a knife in your back.

SEVERUS
Probably!

JULIA
And I will not have a knife in my husband's back!

SEVERUS
None but your own.

Julia looks infuriated and gives Severus a cold glare.

JULIA
I have saved your life. And I will not be shamed for it.

SEVERUS
The rumour is spreading that I sent assassins to kill Niger.

(MORE)

SEVERUS (CONT'D)

My credibility as Emperor is in danger now. There are those in the senate who would see me fail, who undermine me subtly, and will seize this opportunity to deny me the throne, even as Albinus sits in France waiting for me to vacate it.

JULIA

There are those in the Senate who funded Niger's attack force. They would betray you no matter what, and once Niger landed in Rome, I'm sure there would be entire legions defecting. I have eliminated that threat.

SEVERUS

And who helped you? You could not have escaped the Praetorian guards to enact your plan.

Julia gives Severus a slight smirk.

JULIA

Who do you think assisted me? I am their Empress, after all.

Severus looks even more enraged.

SEVERUS

I shall take Laetus's head!

JULIA

What for? Defending you?

SEVERUS

Marcus Aurelius's wife poisoned his body, and you poison my authority!

JULIA

Enough! Everything I have done I have done to protect you, push you to greatness! When you need a soft touch, I give you that. And when you need a humbling, I give you that, too! So if I must murder in darkness and secret meetings, then I will do so!

SEVERUS

You think too much of yourself!

JULIA

And so do you, Caesar!

They stare at each other for a long moment. Eventually, Severus sighs and lets some of his anger fade.

SEVERUS

You have done more harm than you
know. Had you any idea what dangers
I face now...

JULIA

I know precisely what dangers you
face. Two senators plot against
you, and I know who they are.

SEVERUS

Many senators plot against me!
Before I even became a soldier, I
knew the senate was full of snakes!
And you have played right into
their hands!

Julia blinks at his words and frowns, suddenly unsure of
herself.

CUT TO:

EXT. FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

Establishing shot.

CUT TO:

EXT. VINEYARD - LATER

Albinus Clodius walks along the long rows of grape vines. He
smiles as he inspects some very plump grapes. We hear a young
boy shouting.

YOUNG BOY

Message! Message for Albinus
Clodius!

Albinus frowns slightly, but then smiles as the young boy
runs up to him.

CUT TO:

INT. ALBINUS'S ESTATE - LATER

Albinus sits there with an opened scroll in front of him, and
a glass of wine in his hand. He seems at ease, even smiling,
as a fully armoured Centurion enters.

CENTURION

You sent for me, sir?

ALBINUS

My friend, the day we have been
waiting for has come.

(MORE)

ALBINUS (CONT'D)
 Tell the Legate, the Emperor has
 sent an assassin and killed
 Pescennius Niger. We march for
 Rome.

The Centurion nods and salutes.

CENTURION
 Hail, Caesar.

ALBINUS
 Dismissed.

He smiles as the Centurion leaves and looks down at the message. At the bottom is a single signed name "Iago."

CUT TO:

INT. PALACE, EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS - DAY

Severus has several Praetorian Guards standing before him, with a dozen others standing with their weapons ready to attack them. One of the guards standing before him is Laetus. Next to Severus is Demetrius, now wearing the armour of the Prefect.

SEVERUS
 Strip these men of their armour and
 weapons.

The Praetorians begin removing the armour and weapons from their comrades. Soon, the conspirators stand there in nothing more than tunics with looks of shame or fear on their faces. Laetus says nothing, he simply glares at Severus.

SEVERUS (CONT'D)
 Laetus, as Prefect, you are
 responsible for the actions of the
 men under your command. As such, I
 shall give you the choice. Confess,
 tell me truthfully what you have
 done, and I shall be merciful on
 your men.

Laetus looks as if he is about to attack Severus, but holds himself still.

LAETUS
 The Empress ordered us to kill
 Niger. Rome must not have weak
 emperors.

SEVERUS
 Is that what she said?

LAETUS

She said I would be killing you next, Caesar. I alone am responsible for my actions, and my men follow my orders. I will take full responsibility and suffer all consequences.

SEVERUS

Yes, you shall. My wife is a liar, and uses foolish people to achieve her goals. You are a fool, Laetus.

LAETUS

You are the fool. You should have killed Niger years ago.

SEVERUS

Enough. Your men are no longer members of the Praetorian Guard, but they shall not be punished further. You, Laetus... I should execute you before the masses for treason! But that will not undo the damage. No... You shall live, and live to tell the truth that you murdered Niger, that I desired no violence against him, and you shall preserve the honour of my wife by claiming that you acted alone.

LAETUS

So now I must lie?

SEVERUS

We all lie! Today, we lie to prevent Rome from falling into chaos! And should you spread any rumours of my wife's involvement, I shall personally kill you and feed your body to the lions in the coliseum! Demetrius, remove them from this Palace. Kill them if they resist.

DEMETRIUS

Yes, Caesar.

Demetrius steps forward and takes Laetus by the arm. He begins marching him out. The others follow, with the Praetorian's escorting them.

CUT TO:

INT. PALACE, HALLWAY - SECONDS LATER

As Demetrius walks Laetus towards the exit, he looks at his old friend and fellow soldier, clearly disturbed and confused.

DEMETRIUS

My friend, please tell me you have caught some mad fever.

LAETUS

I think I did. Or perhaps that witch cast a spell upon me.

DEMETRIUS

What was your purpose in this?

LAETUS

Must you ask?

DEMETRIUS

I stood by your side, risked my life for yours... Yes, I must ask.

Laetus pauses for a long moment before he answers. He looks Demetrius in the eye.

LAETUS

Ten years ago, my friend, my commander, General Gnaeus died from wounds he took defending the man who would be Emperor. Now, this African taxes Rome into poverty and when threatened by a pathetic, delusional merchant, he makes offers of peace to an enemy he can crush without lifting a finger. He is weak, Demetrius. Whatever fire he had has long since gone to coals.

Demetrius looks shocked and angry.

DEMETRIUS

My uncle was a metal-worker. Trust me, coals burn hotter than fire.

He takes Laetus by the arm and proceeds to almost drag him away.

LAETUS

You will see.

DEMETRIUS

I see fine. It is you, my friend the cyclops, who does not see.

(MORE)

DEMETRIUS (CONT'D)

One more word and I shall pluck out
your other eye.

CUT TO:

INT. SENATE CHAMBER - LATER

Severus stands before the senate, looking angry, but also dignified and strong, like a leader. The entire Senate is there. Iago and Corben sit next to each other while Renautus stands by Severus's side.

SEVERUS

The assassin has been found. He has signed a full confession that he acted alone. He is being thrown out of the guard, and out of Rome. He will be exiled to the farthest reaches of the Empire, and killed instantly should he try to return.

IAGO

This is still most distressing, Caesar. Can you not control your own Praetorian guard?

SEVERUS

The matter has been dealt with, senator. That is all I will say on this matter.

IAGO

Well then, let us discuss another matter. I have learned that the fourth, seventh, and ninth legions are assembling in France. Albinus intends to march on Rome. It would seem his intention is to take the seat of power before any more Praetorian Guards can 'act alone.'

SEVERUS

Or any Roman Senators, for that matter.

Iago and Severus stare into each others eyes for a long moment, an unspoken challenge.

SEVERUS (CONT'D)

In the interest of keeping the administrative duties of Rome running smoothly, I am appointing my son, Marcus Aurelius, as co-emperor. He shall stand in my place while I personally attend to the traitor Albinus.

There is a murmur of dissatisfaction among the senators.

CORBEN

Is it wise for the Emperor to engage in battle? What if you are injured?

SEVERUS

Then you may spend the rest of your lives working with my son.

IAGO

The boy is a madman!

SEVERUS

Then perhaps it is best for you to wish your Emperor a short, successful, and safe journey. If anything should happen to me, I can assure you, my son will be far less tolerant of your scheming.

IAGO

Is that an accusation?

Severus stands and walks towards the exit. The Senate erupts into shouting as he leaves. The Praetorian Guards shut the doors behind him.

CUT TO:

INT. EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS

Severus stands there in his full armour. Several slaves lift and carry trunks out of the room. Julia stands there with tears in her eyes.

JULIA

Please, don't go.

SEVERUS

Had you not interfered, I would not need to go.

JULIA

You must hate me.

SEVERUS

(Pause)

No. I do not hate you. But men will die because of your mistake.

JULIA

I don't want you to be one of them.

Severus smiles and walks towards her. A tear slips down her cheek, and he reaches up, wiping it away.

SEVERUS

Then pray to your gods.

Caracalla walks into the room. He sees them moving luggage away and looks at Severus in surprise.

CARACALLA

You... You asked me to-

SEVERUS

Yes, please, take that silly hood off.

CARACALLA

The hood is the only way I can walk the streets and not be recognised.

SEVERUS

Well, those days are over. With Albinus's betrayal, I am forced to make you my co-emperor.

CARACALLA

What?!

Severus chuckles.

SEVERUS

Isn't this what you've always wanted? When you were a boy, you refused to wear any clothes if they were not purple.

CARACALLA

But... After we fought-

SEVERUS

You are still my son. I can be angry at you and still love you. The gods know, I am angry at your mother often enough.

CARACALLA

Well then... all right. But one thing, father.

SEVERUS

Yes?

CARACALLA

Call me Caracalla.

Severus frowns in confusion, but nods.

SEVERUS

Very well. Hooded-one, you shall be co-Emperor Caracalla. Though, I wish you would have taken to your name. Marcus Aurelius was a great man.

CARACALLA

Perhaps I shall be a greater one.

Severus looks slightly worried, but says nothing.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROMAN COUNTRYSIDE - LATE AFTERNOON

Severus rides at the front of a long column of the Praetorian Guard, with several legions behind him. He has a grim look on his face, and a deep, hollow sadness in his eyes. Demetrius rides beside him, but even he can see that the Emperor has a great weight on his shoulders.

INT. PALACE, EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS - EVENING

Julia looks out the balcony on the city of Rome. She turns back into the chambers and sees Laetus standing there. He has a sword in his hand.

LAETUS

You treacherous witch.

JULIA

If you think you can kill me with that sword, you are even more foolish than I thought.

LAETUS

How about with a secret?

JULIA

My husband will have you burned alive if you spread that rumour.

LAETUS

Not that secret. Your bigger lie.

JULIA

What are you-

LAETUS

"I still have the throne." I never would have understood it, had I not seen with my own eye...

CUT TO:

FLASHBACK

INT. ASTROLOGERS OBSERVATORY - EARLIER

Laetus in hood and cloak stands over the body of the dead astrologer. There are scrolls and parchment scattered everywhere. Laetus bends down and picks up one of the pieces of parchment.

LAETUS (V.O.)

I still have friends in the Guard,
friends who know where you've been
sneaking off to every few nights.
You were careless. You left his
work.

CUT TO:

INT. PALACE, EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS - PRESENT

Laetus tosses a handful of parchment papers on the floor.

LAETUS

So do not fear, witch. I will not
kill you with a sword. I will leave
that to the senate when they learn
of your bastard child who sits on
the throne.

Julia sucks in a breath, her face becoming a blank mask. She looks to Laetus.

JULIA

Many men think I am a witch. They
say I see the future, and that I
can poison a man's mind with sexual
promises.

LAETUS

I know for a fact that last one is
true.

JULIA

But what you do not know is that I
do have real power. That the blood
of the gods flows through my veins,
and my sons also carry that blood.
You threaten my child by exposing
some secret... Look in my eyes. Do
you believe I will not make you
suffer for that?

Julia approaches slowly. Laetus backs away and holds up his blade.

A thick, wet sound is heard, and a blade explodes from Laetus's chest. He sputters, and blood oozes from his mouth. He falls to the ground and reveals the hooded Caracalla standing there.

Julia calmly steps over to the parchment. She picks it up and throws it all into the brazier where it burns away.

Julia and Caracalla look at each other in the dim firelight, neither speaks a word.

CUT TO:

EXT. FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE - ONE WEEK LATER

A line of Romans led by Severus and the Praetorian Guard stand on one side of a wide, open field. On the other side is another line of Roman soldiers. This side wears the Imperial Banner with a white stripe in the middle of it.

Severus stands before the front line. He raises his sword and waves it.

There is an electric tension in the air. Albinus appears from behind the line of legion soldiers. He wears armour and a sword, but he looks ill-suited to combat. Severus approaches the mid-way point. Albinus does so as well.

Each line of Roman soldiers waits breathlessly. We see Demetrius give a subtle hand-signal with his good hand. Behind the front line of soldiers, the archers nock arrows and prepare.

Severus and Albinus meet in the middle between their armies. Severus regards Albinus coldly.

SEVERUS

This is how it must go? More war?

ALBINUS

Says the assassin.

SEVERUS

Things are not what they seem. The senate plays lethal games.

ALBINUS

As do we. Come now, African, did you really believe you could change the face of Rome and no one would argue? Especially the entrenched power behind the senate?

SEVERUS

No. I knew there would be conflict. But I also know that I am less of a man if I do not do everything I can to prevent it.

ALBINUS

How noble. But ultimately wasteful. Look at us here, Severus. Power comes from whoever has the most men, the best weapons, the most loyal troops... the most money.

SEVERUS

Fools can have many followers and much coin. That does not make them good leaders.

ALBINUS

You could surrender. No one would find you a coward.

SEVERUS

No, just an assassin and a hypocrite.

ALBINUS

That is already how you are seen.

SEVERUS

I did not kill Niger!

ALBINUS

It hardly matters, does it?! If I stand down, and wind up dead, it will amount to the same thing as losing in battle. At least this way, I will be seen as a hero to some.

SEVERUS

This is pointless.

ALBINUS

I agree. But this is where we are. Emperors are now chosen by blood, either shedding it or sharing it.

SEVERUS

I beg you one last time, Albinus. Surrender and spare the bloodshed.

ALBINUS

No, black Caesar. It is time for you to vacate the throne.

Severus says nothing. Albinus turns and returns to his line of soldiers. Severus watches him walk away, his eyes full of regret and anger. He turns back to the line of Praetorian Guard. He begins walking back as well.

Demetrius stands there to greet him as he returns. The man has an apprehensive look on his face.

DEMETRIUS

I assume he did not surrender.

SEVERUS

No.

DEMETRIUS

And we're definitely not surrendering.

Severus is silent.

DEMETRIUS (CONT'D)

Right, Caesar?

Severus shuts his eyes and sucks in a breath.

SEVERUS

No. Everything I have built, everything I have done to save the Republic, he would undo.

DEMETRIUS

We await your orders, Caesar.

Severus looks across the field. The soldiers there draw their blades.

Severus's eye twitches at the sound of the steel against scabbards.

SEVERUS

Draw weapons, my friend.

Severus draws his sword, his face hardens into a mask. Demetrius turns to the Praetorians.

DEMETRIUS

Draw and advance!

The guards draw their weapons. The sound of drawn steel sings in the air. The soldiers begin moving forward. Albinus's forces also advance. When they get to a certain point, they begin running at each other.

Severus leads the charge with his sword raised in the air. He bellows out as he charges.

SEVERUS

For Rome!

The cry goes up behind him.

ALL

For Rome!

The lines of soldiers meet and begin clashing, blades against shields. Arrows begin flying overhead, some trailing flames. Severus encounters a small Roman soldier who stalks towards him through the melee. He seems very at ease in the fighting. He appears young, but his eyes are hardened. He begins taking swings at Severus, and it becomes clear that the young man is a very skilled fighter. Severus finds he has met his equal, as the two spar back and forth.

Occasionally, another soldier from one side or another closes in on Severus or on the Young Fighter. They do not last long, as both men are experienced, expert swordsmen. Severus fights without passion, and finds that he is nearly out-matched by the more fierce young man.

The young man swings and clips Severus in the elbow. Severus almost drops his sword, but spins with the blow and swings at the young man's neck. He blocks and kicks Severus in the knee. We hear a snapping sound. Severus growls in pain. We see a flash of fire in his eyes, and Severus retaliates by slashing at the young man's shins. He leaves himself open, and the young fighter slashes at Severus's throat. Severus falls back to avoid the blade, but it scrapes across his armour and bites into his shoulder. Severus cries out as blood leaks out. The cut is deep, but not fatal. Severus falls back onto the ground, now wounded in both arms.

The young man is about to drive his sword into Severus when Demetrius comes out of the melee and engages the young man. Demetrius, despite having only one hand, obviously has an easier time fighting the younger man. He parries and swings, but the young man is too skilled even for Demetrius. Demetrius's shield is knocked off of his stumped arm. Forced to fall back, Demetrius tries to parry with his own sword. The young man bashes Demetrius with his shield, knocking him down.

Severus watches as Demetrius clashes with the younger man. Just as Demetrius appears to fall, Severus gets back up and rushes the young man, howling with rage as he does. His sword sparks off of the young man's armour, but as the young man turns to retaliate, Severus tackles him to the ground. They both go down, dropping their weapons. Severus sees Demetrius's shield lying nearby. He seizes it and raises it high above his head before slamming it into the young man's face. A sickening crunch is heard, and blood splatters out from beneath the shield.

Demetrius recovers and steps over. Severus stands and the two look at each other, sharing only a grim nod. Demetrius retrieves his shield and begins sliding his stump back into it. Severus retrieves his sword. Once recovered, the two wade into combat once again.

We see from the air that arrows are so thick overhead that it's impossible to see the fighting clearly. But the ground is beginning to turn crimson with the blood of the Romans.

FADE TO:

EXT. FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE - LATER

The battlefield is a wasteland of corpses and blood. Smoke clouds drift over mounds of the dead. Clouds of flies swarm over the carnage. Severus is bandaged, and kneeling before him is Albinus, also wounded, his armour battered and blood seeping from underneath. Demetrius stands behind Albinus with his sword drawn, looking to Severus. Severus looks at Albinus, staring into his eyes.

SEVERUS
Do you yield?

ALBINUS
No.

Demetrius does not hesitate. He executes Albinus by cutting his throat. Severus watches as the mans blood leaks out onto the already-stained ground. It pools around Severus's feet.

DEMETRIUS
It's over.

SEVERUS
Yes. Until the next battle.

DEMETRIUS
Against who?

Severus sighs and shuts his eyes.

SEVERUS
Even the Emperor cannot control the hearts of men.

Severus walks away. Demetrius watches him go, but does not follow.

FADE TO:

EXT. ROMAN SENATE - LATER

Establishing shot.

CUT TO:

INT. ROMAN SENATE - CONTINUOUS

Caracalla stands there in the purple toga of the Emperor, which now includes a purple hood. He is flanked by the Praetorian Guard. The senators are assembled before him. There is a hushed silence as if everyone is holding their breath.

CARACALLA

Iago, Corben, Antonius, Patricio,
step forward.

The Senators step forward, albeit reluctantly. Caracalla looks to the rest of the senate.

CARACALLA (CONT'D)

It is important for the Senate and the Emperor to work together, not against each other. My father has been tolerant of your scheming and your selfish motives. When I am emperor, I shall not be.

Iago opens his mouth, but Caracalla holds up a hand and he falls silent.

CARACALLA (CONT'D)

You four, you shall assemble in the public square to deliver an apology.

CORBEN

For what?

Iago elbows Corben into silence. He shoots the man a warning glare.

CARACALLA

(Smirks)
You know what for.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROMAN STREETS, LARGE MARKET SQUARE - LATER

The four senators are standing in a line on a raised platform, surrounded by Praetorian Guards. Caracalla stands there, and with a smile, he nods to the Praetorian Guards. Caracalla turns to address the Romans assembled there.

CARACALLA

These four senators have plotted to undermine your emperor. Now, they shall be humbled before you all.

The Praetorian Guards seize the senators and chain their hands.

The senators begin bellowing and struggling, but the guards restrain them and one takes out a whip. Iago looks in pale horror as the whip is cracked.

CARACALLA (CONT'D)

It is the same whips we use on the slaves. Fitting, is it not?

The guard with the whip gets into position behind Iago first.

CARACALLA (CONT'D)

I think ten each shall suffice.

Iago looks back at Caracalla, hatred burning in his eyes. The whip cracks, and Iago cries out in pain as the back of his toga is torn and blood seeps out.

CUT TO:

INT. FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE, ROMAN CAMP - DUSK

Severus sits as a surgeon stitches up his shoulder. Demetrius stands there, also looking recently patched-up, but exhausted nonetheless. The surgeon finishes and steps away, taking his supplies. Severus lifts a cup of wine to his lips, but stops and looks down at the deep red liquid. A slight grimace crosses his face and he sets the cup down.

DEMETRIUS

More scars for the collection.
Anything cut deep?

SEVERUS

Not too deep. How are you, my old friend?

DEMETRIUS

(Deadpan)
Well, they can't save my arm.

Severus looks at him like he's crazy, but then they both crack a smile and share a hearty laugh.

SEVERUS

You fought well today. As always.

DEMETRIUS

You're slowing down. Ten years ago, you'd have taken half that line of Romans by yourself.

SEVERUS

War is a young man's game.

DEMETRIUS

Albinus wasn't that young.

SEVERUS

No... But he understood what he was doing. He chose not to spend time in Rome. I think, perhaps, I shall follow in that notion.

DEMETRIUS

Wait... How can the Emperor rule if he's not in Rome?

SEVERUS

I never wished to rule Rome, only save it from itself. I suspect Albinus might be right. In any case... I no longer wish to rule by shed blood.

FADE TO:

EXT. SEPTIMIUS HOUSE, LEPCIS MAGNA - MORNING

Establishing shot.

CUT TO:

EXT. SEPTIMIUS HOUSE, LEPCIS MAGNA, GARDEN - MORNING

An elderly Fulvia Pia sits tending a small herb garden. She goes to rise, but it's clear her knees hurt. She almost stumbles, but a hand appears in the shot to help her up.

She looks up, and we follow her gaze to Severus. A look of absolute joy comes over her face. He helps her up and she embraces him. Tears begin leaking from her eyes, and Severus sheds a few himself.

CUT TO:

INT. PALACE, EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS - DAY

Caracalla sits on the throne while slaves and servants bring him food. Geta sits nearby, looking proud. Julia stands stock-still, a look of horror on her face.

NIGER (V.O.)

I... still... have... the... throne.

CUT TO:

BLACK.