

ET TU, SHOWBIZ?

Written by

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OVER BLACK:

Rome.

Eternal City.

Beating heart of the greatest empire the world has ever known.

Our story begins...

BEAT.

Somewhere else.

FADE IN:

**EXT. DUSTY FARM - JUDAEA - NIGHT**

A golden haze hangs over a dry, scrubby farm. The wheat waves lazily in the breeze. The occasional bray of a donkey breaks the stillness. Everything suggests absolutely nothing is happening.

Then... from the barn...

A ROAR OF LAUGHTER.

WE TRACK across the empty field to the barn. The door creaks open on a tableau that could only exist in this time and place:

A makeshift wooden STAGE, a crowd of enraptured VILLAGERS and bemused LIVESTOCK.

**INT. BARN - NIGHT**

Crates form rows. Clay oil lamps flicker. FARMERS, CHILDREN, and a few SHEEP crowd in. Some lean in through the windows.

The stage been lashed together with barrels and planks. Painted backdrops sag slightly – one shows a giant fish, another a crude boat.

Onstage, JONAH (17) – village heartthrob and knows it – kneels centre, muttering to the sky.

Behind him looms a large jerry-rigged WHALE HEAD, wobbling ominously on a wheelbarrow chassis. It has a working spout – a leather wineskin rigged with a bellows.

YOUNG JO (14), scrawny, barefoot, hides behind a hay bale just offstage. He cues the next bit with a sharp finger snap.

Two CHORUS FARMHANDS, wearing repurposed sacks as tunics, step forward and declaim in unison, rhythmically:

## CHORUS FARMHANDS

(in unison)

Jonah ran from God's great plan –  
 Took a boat and fled the land. But  
 stormy winds and angry tide – Said,  
 "Get out, Jonah – time to ride!"

The noise of the storm grows: stagehands banging makeshift  
 drums and calling out eerie sounds.

## CROWD

Ooh!

Jo pumps the bellows. The whale spout SPRAYS the front row. A  
 TODDLER shrieks with delight.

Jonah leaps up, pantomimes terror, and runs across the stage.  
 The whale wobbles after him, pushed by TWO SHEEPDOGS in  
 harness, steered by a disguised FARM BOY under the frame.

The whale "gulps" Jonah in a dramatic lurch. Jonah dives  
 headfirst through a fabric flap and disappears.

The crowd gasps. A GOAT bleats on cue. From inside the whale,  
 muffled groaning and exaggerated SEAWEED-PULLING ensue. A  
 head of lettuce flies out of the mouth.

In the wings, Jo holds up a hand, waits, then drops it.

## CHORUS FARMHANDS

(in unison)

Three long days in belly wet – Has  
 Jonah learned his lesson yet?

## CROWD

(various)

No!

## CHORUS FARMHANDS

(in unison)

He prayed, he cried, he swore to  
 change – Then splash! The sea got  
 rearranged.

Jo slams a hidden lever. The whale tilts forward. Jonah  
 tumbles out onto a canvas "beach," flailing and gasping like  
 a damp sock.

Then –

## JONAH

(piously)

I obey thy will, O Lord.

## CROWD

(various)

He's alive! The whale spat him out!  
 Etc.

Jo signals. The crowd picks up a rhythm – clapping, stomping.  
Kids chant:

CHILDREN

(various)

He showed that whale who's boss!  
Jonah's the best! That's not a real  
whale, etc.

CHORUS FARMHANDS

(in unison)

With seaweed hair and fishy breath,  
He prayed his way from certain  
death!

An ANGEL drops down from the barn roof on a pulley. The angel  
is holding a beaten-up ram's horn, on which he plays a  
rickety fanfare.

Jonah drops to his knees in thankful prayer. The music  
swells. The whale pokes his head back onto the stage; the  
farm hand operator sticks his head out of the mouth and waves  
to the audience. The crowd goes wild – livestock and human.

YOUNG JO

(beaming)

Now that's theatre.

#### **INT. BARN - NIGHT**

The performance over, a FARMER stumbles over and slings an  
arm around Jo.

FARMER

Josephus! You little orphan genius!  
That whale was – I couldn't believe  
when the water came out of its  
thingy. How'd you do that?!

YOUNG JO

Empty wineskin. Borrowed bellows.  
Trade secret.

FARMER

If I were a betting man, Jo, I'd  
say one day you'll play Caesar's  
palace.

YOUNG JO

I'd settle for some proper actors –  
or at least ones that don't smell  
like goat.

FARMER

Keep the faith, my boy. It ain't  
over till, um...

A LARGE ACTRESS from the show walks past with a fellow cast member; then she bursts into song.

FARMER (CONT'D)

Till... I'll think of something.

The farmer leaves and Jo is now all alone on the stage. Some of his actors are sitting in the makeshift audience area, chatting and congratulating one another.

Jo looks around at what he has created with enormous pride.

YOUNG JO

(singing)

*Here in the dust,  
With flies in the air,  
Dreams feel so far,  
Like they're not even there.  
Give me a stage,  
Just a plank and a play -  
I'll make it big...  
I'll do it in a broad way.  
They call me a nobody,  
Mud on my shoes,  
But orphans like me  
Just don't get to choose.  
From tatters and trickery,  
Spectacles grow -  
Rome doesn't know me yet...  
But it will know.  
Nowhere, Judea -  
That's where I start.  
A wine-skin whale and a lion-heart.  
The road is rough  
And the night is long -  
But tomorrow Rome will hear my  
song!  
Tomorrow Rome will cheer me on!  
Let emperors strut,  
Let senators preen,  
I'll show them a magic  
That they've never seen.  
A laugh in the dark,  
A gasp in the air,  
The stage will be mine -  
And I'll take them there.  
So mock me, forget me,  
Call me a fool,  
A farm boy who fiddled  
With bellows at school.  
But I've got a vision  
That won't let me go -  
Rome doesn't know me yet...  
But it will know.  
Nowhere, Judea -  
It's small, but it's mine.  
I'll fight for the footlights,  
I'll carve out my line.*

(MORE)

YOUNG JO (CONT'D)

*I'll give them the wonder  
They've never known -  
And tomorrow all the seven hills  
will know!  
Tomorrow Rome will call me Jo!  
Props that tumble, sets that fall,  
Goats that bleat instead of call,  
Crowds that laugh and beg for more:  
That's the dream I'm fighting for!  
Nowhere, Judea -  
But not for too long.  
The spotlight is waiting,  
My faith is strong.  
One boy, one dream,  
One stage, one home -  
Nowhere, Judea...  
Tomorrow - Rome!*

WIDE SHOT: YOUNG JO BATHED IN THE GLOW OF HIS GLORIOUS TRIUMPH.

MATCH CUT TO:

**INT. CRUMBLING PROVINCIAL THEATRE - DAY**

SUPER: "XV YEARS LATER." BEAT. "NOT ROME."

Jo, now late 20s, stands in the wings of a crumbling playhouse. Unshaven, careworn, badly dressed; he looks like a man comprehensively beaten up by life.

He's older, more cynical. There is still the flicker of fire behind his eyes. But only just.

ON STAGE: A shabby troupe of players perform an overwrought and old-fashioned Greek tragedy to an audience of less than a dozen. The gestures are horribly OTT.

PROVINCIAL ACTOR 1  
(loud, dreadful)  
Oh noble Phallus, thou hast  
returned from war!

PROVINCIAL ACTOR 2  
(as bad - maybe worse)  
Indeed, I have just come.

Dead silence. A goat bleats - loudly.

PROVINCIAL ACTOR 2 (CONT'D)  
Hark, my gentle lady! How sweet she  
sings!

PROVINCIAL ACTRESS (80s) makes her entrance.

PROVINCIAL ACTOR 2 (CONT'D)  
 Oh, sweet Myrrhina, temptress  
 divine. Grasp my sack, for it is  
 thine.

He hands his leather bag to the elderly actress. She looks completely thrown.

**INT. CRUMBLING PROVINCIAL THEATRE - WINGS - DAY**

JO  
 (consulting the script)  
 "Grasp my sack"? Eww.

**INT. CRUMBLING PROVINCIAL THEATRE - STAGE - DAY**

The actor playing Phallus is trying to guide the aged actress, who keeps giving him back the bag. He gives it to her, she gives it to him, etc.

After a moment of this back-and-forth, the actors just stand still waiting for Myrrhina's line. It doesn't come. She just smiles vaguely at the audience.

A single cough from the back of the theatre. A cheap-looking prop at the side of the stage falls with a crash - narrowly missing one of the actors on stage. The actors stand rigid, unsure of what to do next.

Beat.

HECKLER (O.S.)  
 That was the best part! You guys  
 suck!

FABIANUS (who played Phallus), GEMELLUS, and SILVIA (who played Myrrhina) stand in silence. They look crestfallen, but not surprised.

Fabianus (70s) is a big bear of man, his best years on the stage long behind him. Silvia (80s) - the actress - has the remains of a great beauty about her, and a delightfully vague countenance. Gemellus (20s) is a tall, exceptionally good-looking young man of impressive physique, but not the sharpest gladius in the armoury.

The audience is filing out despondently.

Jo sighs.

**EXT. CRUMBLING PROVINCIAL THEATRE - DAY**

Jo exhales and leans on the wall just outside the stage door, staring down at the empty, messy street: bewildered, bereft.

Then – a scrap of parchment flutters near his foot.

He picks it up. Half-torn, wind-worn. It's a poster: "ATTALUS THE GREAT. ROME'S SLAYER RETURNS! BLOOD! GORE! BRING THE KIDS!"

A crude woodcut shows a hulking, helmeted gladiator mid-roar – sword aloft – foot on some unidentifiable corpse. The artistry is bad. The impact is undeniable.

Jo stares at it.

JO

Give them what they want: make a fortune. Attalus the Great. Pah! He doesn't need a script – just a torso and couple of random decapitations. (beat) Give them what they want, make a fortune. (beat) Hmm, they may be onto something.

He folds the poster, tucks it into his satchel and looks deep in thought.

#### **INT. PROVINCIAL TABERNA - NIGHT**

A smoky, low-beamed dive where wine flows and dreams drown. Jo sits at a rickety table, chewing stale barley bread like it owes him money.

Nearby, the troupe nurses the tavern's cheapest red.

Fabianus drops into the seat beside Jo, nudging him.

FABIANUS

You know what you need, Jo?

JO

Better actors?

FABIANUS

Oh, come now – today's show wasn't especially bad.

JO

No. Just bad in all the usual ways. Twelve people and a goat. And I'm pretty sure the goat walked out.

FABIANUS

Yes. Tragic. That goat really got my performance, you know. Still – I've been in worse plays.

JO

I know. I saw them.

Silvia slides in.

SILVIA

Chin up, darling. Not every producer's a legend. Just like not every performer's a star. Take gladiators: you've got your butcher's meat – and then you've got...

GEMELLUS

(moony)  
Attalus.

JO

Oy.

FABIANUS

He's got star quality, Jo. Amphorae of it. If we're sinking, why not get someone like him?

JO

Because he's the highest-paid performer in the Empire! Why would he swap baths and courtesans for watching you do to Greek tragedy what Romulus did to Remus?

FABIANUS

Remind me, darling?

JO

He murdered him. I can relate.

SILVIA

It doesn't have to be Attalus, darling. Just someone exactly like him in every way.

Gemellus nods. Jo stares.

FABIANUS

Silvia's right. Strong. Mysterious. Dangerous.

GEMELLUS

Cheap.

SILVIA

Naturally. (to Jo) You're not exactly living the life of Rileus, are you, my dear?

She gestures at Jo's worn tunic and the tavern grime.

SILVIA (CONT'D)

No money, career in the latrine...

JO

Tha—

SILVIA

Clothes like a muleteer's shroud.  
Stench like a galley slave's  
sandal.

JO

Thank you, Silvia. I am your boss,  
you know.

SILVIA

And you're doing a marvellous job,  
darling.

**INT. CAMPUS MARTIUS ARENA - ROME - DAY**

A wall of sound. The sun blazes down on the sand. Drums pound. VENDORS shout. CHILDREN wave wooden swords.

There is a festival mood in the air as the happy crowd hustle and bustle. Street VENDORS hawk their wares. BUSKERS entertain the crowd with juggling and tumbling.

**INT. CAMPUS MARTIUS ARENA - HOLDING TUNNEL - DAY**

Dark. Tight. Chains rattle. A dozen men await their turn. Some pray. Some tremble.

In the centre, still as marble: ATTALUS, 30s.

Massive. Muscled like an Olympian. Calm. Dried blood crusts his greaves. His sword lies beside him, unsheathed.

HERALD (O.S.)

(from the arena)

Ladies and citizens of Rome... Your  
champion returns! The lion of  
Latium! The slayer of Spartus! The  
undefeated, unchallenged,  
unrelenting — Attalus the Great!

The tunnel gate rattles open. Light floods in.

Attalus puts on his helmet and stands: slow, deliberate, bored. Picks up his sword. Walks into the light.

**INT. CAMPUS MARTIUS ARENA - IMPERIAL BOX - DAY**

In the shaded imperial box, SENATORS lounge and wager.

Half-reclined, watching through a gold spyglass: EMPEROR NERO (30s) — painted, pampered, preening... and utterly at ease with power.

NERO  
 That's the look I want, right?  
 Remember I was saying? The hair.  
 The chunky sandals.

At his side, THRASEA (30s), a strikingly handsome, gorgeously robed senator of North African descent – with the cool air of a man always three moves ahead.

NERO (CONT'D)  
 Write it down. "Chunky sandals."

Thrasea obliges, scratching on papyrus.

THRASEA  
 "Chunky. Sandals."

NERO  
 Good. And tell the Praetorians –  
 that tailor who botched my hem? I  
 want him here in the arena.

THRASEA  
 As your guest?

NERO  
 As bait.

He turns the spyglass back to the arena, smiling faintly as the crowd howls for blood.

The GATES at the far end burst open. A PRISONER is shoved into the arena – barely armed, terrified. A cheer ripples through the stands: everyone loves an easy kill.

Attalus doesn't rush. He doesn't posture.

**INT. CAMPUS MARTIUS ARENA - IMPERIAL BOX - DAY**

NERO  
 There – you see, Thrasea? That  
 presence? That silence before the  
 kill? Such panache.

THRASEA  
 Are we writing that down too, sire?  
 Or are we thinking "ode"?

NERO  
 Surprise me.

**INT. CAMPUS MARTIUS ARENA - DAY**

Attalus walks. The prisoner stumbles back. A sword swing – clumsy, desperate.

Attalus sidesteps.

One blow.

It's over.

Attalus turns. He looks out at 70,000 people cheering his name.

No joy. No pride. Just sweat and silence.

**INT. CAMPUS MARTIUS ARENA - IMPERIAL BOX - DAY**

Nero's eyes narrow. Lips tighten.

NERO

How they cheer the mighty Attalus.

Thrasea notices the Emperor's tone.

**INT. CRUMBLING PROVINCIAL THEATRE - DAY**

JO

Alright, people – we need a hit. A big, fat, slay-'em-in-the-orchestra, Trojan-War-style, run-forever smash. (beat) No pressure.

Gemellus's hand shoots up like an overeager schoolboy.

JO (CONT'D)

Not now, Gemellus – the adults are talking.

The hand sinks. Sad puppy eyes.

JO (CONT'D)

Fine. Go ahead. This is a safe space. No stupid ideas, blah blah. Go nuts.

GEMELLUS

Okay, right – what about a bunch of people in a villa, and someone gets murdered? And there's all these suspects and clues, and then a clever magistrate gathers everyone in one room and...

He falters. Beat.

JO

That's the stupidest idea I ever heard.

FABIANUS

Pull yourself together, boy.

GEMELLUS

Yeah. Dumb. Sorry.

JO

Right. So – to recap: no money, no playwright, no script, no scenery, no costumes...

FABIANUS

Eureka! By the gods, I have it!

All turn.

FABIANUS (CONT'D)

Two words: Battle. Of. Actium.

SILVIA

Ooh, lovely!

JO

The naval Battle of Actium? Armies, oceans – 80,000 troops, 500 ships – that Battle of Actium?

FABIANUS

Exactly. The Forum will go wild.

JO

With you early-bird specials and (gestures at Gemellus) this bargain-bin Narcissus?!

GEMELLUS

Hey – also, I can't swim. Is that gonna be a problem?

JO

Yes, Gemellus. On account of the oceans.

**INT. CAMPUS MARTIUS ARENA - LOCKER ROOM - DAY**

Attalus – shirtless, armour off – sits on a bench, staring into the middle distance.

Enter PARACLES (60s), his agent: tanned, lacquered, and lubricated with optimism.

PARACLES

Bubbeleh! My big, brave gladiator! You moved like Mars in a designer loincloth – I wept! Twice!

ATTALUS

It was over in ten seconds.

PARACLES

A masterclass! Now listen – Antioch wants you. Alexandria's doubled their offer. And Thessalonica? Meet-and-greet, plus a sacrifice. Either virgins or cattle – frankly, with Thessalonican women, could go either way.

ATTALUS

I'm done.

PARACLES

Done with what? With being the greatest? With being beloved? With letting your abs express your truth? (touches abs, feigns injury) Ooh – sharp.

ATTALUS

I'm done with the arena.

Beat.

PARACLES

Don't say "theatre".

ATTALUS

Theatre.

PARACLES

He said it! By the gods, he said it!

ATTALUS

I want to perform. Not kill. Not grunt. Be an artist.

PARACLES

Bubbeleh – you are art! A big, beautiful demigod of a man. Like the Minotaur... but with a normal head.

ATTALUS

Then it's time I made real art.

PARACLES

What are you now – Metrobius?!

ATTALUS

Who?

PARACLES

Who?! Only the greatest actor who ever lived, that's who! Sixteen gold laurels at Olympia! They named a soup after him in Thrace! Dead, retired, or priced outta the market. But who cares about some old thespian? What about poor old Paracles, huh?

Attalus shrugs.

PARACLES (CONT'D)

Oh sure – Paracles starved, Attalus shrugged.

ATTALUS

It's not about you. Be objective.

Beat.

PARACLES

Oy. So you're gonna do... dialogue?

ATTALUS

Yes.

PARACLES

From your mouth?

ATTALUS

Paracles –

PARACLES

(to the gods)

Take me now!

**INT. CAMPUS MARTIUS ARENA - IMPERIAL BOX - DAY**

Nero lounges in the shade, gold spyglass in hand, watching the crowd still roaring for Attalus. Their enthusiasm feels... disloyal. The detachment: it rankles.

NERO

They love him, don't they?

THRASEA

They do seem to enjoy chanting his name, Caesar. (beat) Loudly.

NERO

Yes... but they do it like he belongs to them.

NERO (CONT'D)

He's mine, Thrasea. They all are.  
Their loyalty, their devotion,  
their very breath – it's a gift I  
alone bestow.

THRASEA

But of course, sire.

NERO

Schedule a concert appearance for  
me, Thrasea. Something heroic.  
Something immortal. But close by –  
my talent is like a great, silver  
fish – glinting in the rivers of  
Art, dazzling all who glimpse it.

THRASEA

(under his breath)

After a while, it stinks.

NERO

(oblivious)

Which is why it must be displayed  
here, where the waters are pure –  
and the audience is mine.

THRASEA

Of course, great Caesar.

NERO

Get the same judges as last time.  
They adored me.

THRASEA

Did they? They screamed a lot  
before –

NERO

Before what?

THRASEA

Before their heads left the  
vicinity of their necks, sire.

NERO

Ah. Yes. That. Well... get new  
ones. (beat) Ones with heads.

Nero rises, arms spread wide to the adoring masses below.

NERO (CONT'D)

Rome! Your true son returns! Your  
voice, your soul, your god-kissed  
muse! The hour has come for –

HECKLER (O.S.)  
Yo, Nero! You suck, man! Worst  
emperor ever!

Nero's smile freezes.

Beat.

THRASEA  
Singing in concert, sire? Is  
that... wise?

NERO  
(to himself)  
Attalus will regret this.

THRASEA  
(sotto voce)  
We all will.

**INT. PROVINCIAL TABERNA - DAY**

The crew picks at their food. Jo paces like a man possessed.

JO  
Here's the situation – again: no  
money, no star, no show. Ideas?

FABIANUS  
Tragedy. Brooding. Tears rolling  
down a marble cheek?

SILVIA  
Or a mad oracle? I do a fine mad  
oracle.

GEMELLUS  
(quietly)  
We could ask my father for the  
cash.

JO  
Your father?

GEMELLUS  
He's... a merchant. Sorta.

JO  
A rich merchant?

GEMELLUS  
Kinda. Grain. Ports.

JO  
Ports? Plural? For Mercury's sake,  
Gemellus! And you didn't mention  
this because...?

GEMELLUS

He hates theatre. Says it's a waste of time.

JO

Of course it's a waste of time – that's the point!

FABIANUS

Still, a rich father...

GEMELLUS

He won't invest, Jo. I've asked before. Told me to stop playing make-believe.

JO

What if I pitch it as a business? Numbers. Profit. Investment. (beat) Those are things in business, right?

SILVIA

Absolutely no idea, darling.

JO

This is our shot. He'll see the bigger picture.

GEMELLUS

He won't like it. He's... unpredictable.

JO

Perfect. I'll get that meeting or die trying. As God – my God this time, gentiles – as God is my witness: I'm not giving up.

GEMELLUS

One wrinkle.

JO

Wrinkle?

GEMELLUS

He's in Rome.

JO

I'm giving up.

Fabianus gets an unusual look on his face.

JO (CONT'D)

What is it, Fab?

FABIANUS

I have an idea.

JO

Oh gods.

**EXT. CAESAREA MARITIMA DOCKS - DAY**

The bustling dock is filled with ships, crates, and the loud calls of traders. Jo stands at the edge of the quay, looking up at a large trireme ready for departure. In front of the boat is a sign that reads:

GALLEY SLAVES ("~~SLAVES~~" is crossed out, with "VOLUNTEERS" written above it.)

JO

(to himself)

Some sea air, a little exercise.  
This is going to be fun.

**INT. GALLEY - BELOW DECK - DAY**

A narrow, miserable bench wedged between sweating, tattooed criminals.

Chains clink. The smell is biblical.

Suddenly – a cheery voice.

The CABIN STEWARD (30s) – extremely handsome and well-groomed, spotless tunic, blinding sandals, a smile carved in marble. Clipboard in hand.

CABIN STEWARD

Salve, and welcome aboard what I like to call the "Row Man Empire" – haha, thank you. Westbound to Rome, with one scheduled flogging and light refreshments. Please keep limbs inside the galley at all times. In the unlikely event of a water landing – or as we call it, drowning – your chains will detach automatically. (beat) Probably. Rowing-assistance scrolls are available, but if you can't read we advise you to pray.

**MONTAGE - THE SEA VOYAGE FROM HELL:**

The drummer pounds a brutal tempo. Jo misses the first beat – CRACK across the back with a switch.

Oars dip; Jo's is late. WHACK – right into the guy behind him. Not happy.

The steward drops a ladle of grey slop into Jo's bowl with a wet slap. Jo gags. Wave crashes through the porthole, soaking him.

Night: Jo slumps asleep. Everyone lifts oars; Jo's head smacks into his.

Morning: bleary-eyed, Jo stretches.

CABIN STEWARD (CONT'D)

We do ask you to remain chained until the vessel has come to a complete stop, for your own safety and comfort.

**EXT. PORT OF OSTIA - DAY**

Jo staggers off the ship, soaked and ragged. The "volunteers" trail behind.

The steward - still immaculate:

CABIN STEWARD

By-bye. Thank you for rowing with us today. Your suffering funds the Empire. Thank you. By-bye now.

**INT. GEMELLUS'S FATHER'S HOUSE - DAY**

The opulent merchant's house, filled with golden bowls, polished marble, and exotic spices. GAIUS DONATUS (60s) - Gemellus' intimidating father - sits at his massive desk, flipping through scrolls. There is something about the atmosphere - the low lighting, the brawny THUGS standing by the door - that makes Jo feel that the word "merchant" may cover a multitude of sins.

Jo - still shabbily dressed, but he's made an effort - stands across from him, doing his best to present an air of confidence.

JO

Picture it, Gaius Donatus - Spartacus meets The Bacchae, with the sweat of the arena thrown in. Drama, action, spectacle, and true love.

GAIUS DONATUS

Sounds expensive.

JO

Of course it's expensive - it's epic! Gladiators, sword fights, tragedy, romance. Everything the mob wants.

GAIUS DONATUS  
 (menacingly)  
 The who?

JO  
 The mo- I mean: the crowd. Listen,  
 all I need is a tiny investment:  
 five hundred denarii. In return:  
 ticket sales, sponsorship,  
 merchandise - your name on every  
 tongue. A legacy, Don Gaius.

GAIUS DONATUS  
 They call me "The Don", kid. And  
 I'm in grain. I sell what people  
 need. Theatre? Sounds like a fad.

JO  
 Not a fad - a franchise! Think "The  
 God Father" - family, betrayal,  
 drama -

GAIUS DONATUS  
 The God Father?

JO  
 A play I wrote about Jupiter - you  
 know: father of the gods. Thought  
 it'd be bigger than it was. Had a  
 horse's head gag - killed every  
 night... the gag, not the horse.

GAIUS DONATUS  
 Kid, no one fills seats for a "good  
 story" and a couple of wooden  
 swords. You need a name they know.  
 A gladiator. A star.

JO  
 A star. I can find a star.

GAIUS DONATUS  
 Find one and we'll talk. Until  
 then? You've just got an empty  
 theatre and my palooka of a son  
 playing dress-up.

JO  
 So - care to make me an offer I  
 can't refuse?

GAIUS DONATUS  
 No, kid. I am - however - refusing.

Jo looks crestfallen.

**INT. UPMARKET PALATINE TABERNA - NIGHT**

The taberna is luxurious, filled with elegant patrons and rich decor. Attalus is seated at the best table with his agent, Paracles.

Attalus has a weary look on his face as he picks at his enormous, protein-based meal; his brow furrowed in frustration.

Near Attalus' table is an Ethiopian LYRE PLAYER. Attalus attracts his attention and tosses him a coin.

ATTALUS

You played it for her, you can play  
it for me. Play it, Sammius.

The lyre player begins to play Attalus' favourite song; full of longing and mournful regret. Paracles rolls his eyes and downs a long draft of wine.

Jo enters the taberna sheepishly, dressed in his shabby clothes; he grows wide-eyed at the sheer luxury of the place. He crosses to the scroll of prices above the bar – gold lettering on purple silk. His mouth opens. Shuts. Opens again.

JO

That's not a menu: it's a ransom  
note.

He steps back – and bumps into a waitress – VIBIA (20s) – fiercely beautiful with a shock of dark hair and beguiling eyes. A goblet wobbles. She catches it expertly.

VIBIA

Careful, pal – some of us are  
carrying a tray full of other  
people's debt.

JO

(flustered)  
Sorry – I wasn't – I mean – I  
didn't...

VIBIA

Eyes forward, buddy. First time in  
the Palatine?

JO

What gave it away? The sandals? The  
rags? Or that even the lentils in  
this joint are out of my league?

VIBIA

All three. Plus a faint whiff of...  
galley sweat? Let me guess. Actor?  
Swineherd?

JO

Both. Depending on who you ask. I was hoping for a cheap meal...

VIBIA

In here? Honey, even the olives come with a payment plan.

JO

Right. I'll just crawl back to the slums and rethink my life choices.

VIBIA

(charmed)

Smart man. Hey, if you want a drink you can actually afford, try the Subura – there's a taberna with a pair of masks over the door. Comedy and Tragedy.

(beat, wry)

Just look for Tragedy. Comedy burned off in the last fire.

Jo makes to thank her, but she has hustled away. A gigantic BOUNCER approaches and gives Jo a menacing look. He scarpers for the exit.

At the best table, Paracles is enthusiastically discussing the next opportunity for his client, but Attalus is clearly distracted. He puts up his hand to silence his agent.

ATTALUS

Another contest, another ovation, another day choking on sand and praise. I used to feel alive out there, Paracles. Now? I feel like one of the extras.

PARACLES

You mean the corpses?

ATTALUS

Whatever. It's blood, sweat, and no meaning. What's the point?

PARACLES

The point's on the end of your sword, baby. The people adore you! You are the arena. They chant your name, they swoon over your –

ATTALUS

– biceps. Yeah, I noticed. But I want more. I want to make them think, feel. Not just gasp when I chop off another head.

PARACLES

Baby, you rule seventy thousand screaming lunatics. That's power.

ATTALUS

It's not enough. I want to act. I want to be remembered for more than my sword.

PARACLES

Acting? Phooey. What are you gonna do, join some ragtag troupe of half-starved hacks? Oh, please.

Vibia, the waitress, approaches with a tray of drinks. She's graceful, confident, and her eyes linger on Attalus as she moves toward him. As she passes by the table, she trips slightly on Paracles' elaborate toga – and the tray goes flying, drinks splashing all over Attalus's tunic.

VIBIA

Oh my gods! I am so sorry! I didn't mean – let me – oh, please forgive me, sir.

ATTALUS

(amused)

That's one way to get my attention.

PARACLES

Can't you be careful, huh? This is the mighty Attalus! Of all the gladiators in all the world, you had to spill onto mine?

VIBIA

I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to – please, let me fix it. I –

As she leans forward to clean up the mess, her sleeve shifts, briefly revealing the cross tattooed on her wrist. It's small but noticeable, and Paracles spots it immediately.

PARACLES

Hey, what is that?

VIBIA

It's nothing – just... it's – a sign of my faith. It's nothing, really.

PARACLES

(whispering)

A Christian? You've got the mark of a Christian and you're working in a taberna full of Romans? Are you trying to get us all killed?

ATTALUS

Wait... what's a "Christian"?

PARACLES

Oh, read a scroll some time, would ya?

VIBIA

It's not... I'm not causing trouble. I'm just here to work. Please, don't -

The taberna's keeper, RICCIUS (50s), approaches.

RICCIUS

Everything okay here, folks?

Vibia isn't quick enough to pull her sleeve down. Riccius spots the tattoo, grabs her wrist.

RICCIUS (CONT'D)

You know the rules, toots. From day one I knew you were trouble. Want to risk Nero's wrath? Get Ric's place shut down, huh? What do I tell the Praetorians when they come barging in? Why, you little minx!

He raises a hand to strike - and it's caught mid-swing by a massive, muscled forearm. Attalus. His low growl says don't even think about it.

PARACLES

Easy, Ric - she's just a kid!

RICCIUS

She's history. Out. Now.

Vibia's face falls. She looks to Attalus for help, but Paracles clamps a hand on his shoulder before he can move. Vibia nods, blinking back tears, and runs out the back.

Attalus sits, still tense.

ATTALUS

Is that serious?

PARACLES

Being a Christian? Oh, they're flavour of the month - ask the lions. Word is they've been stirring up trouble in the Subura. And our Emperor? Ears everywhere.

ATTALUS

She's a waitress. Who cares about a dumb tattoo?

PARACLES

Because this is Nero's Rome, kid.  
You want that head to stay on those  
broad shoulders? Keep your  
distance.

Attalus leans back, eyes still on the door. He takes a long  
drink.

ATTALUS

I think this could be the beginning  
of a beautiful...

BOUNCER

Last call, people. Last call. Let's  
go.

Attalus sighs.

**INT. COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA - NIGHT**

A smoky dive in the Subura. Plaster peeling, torches  
sputtering, crowd half-drunk and half-hostile. Sandals stick  
to the floor. Laughter's mostly habit – or threat.

Above the bar: a carved sign – "Comedy & Tragedy."  
Underneath, scrawled: We're still big! It's the audiences  
that got small!!

Jo pushes through the beaded curtain, dust-streaked, satchel  
over his shoulder. He scans the room: sagging stage, a  
handful of wobbly tables, bartender asleep on his feet.

On stage: DROLIO, 70s, bloated, balding, toga in tatters.

DROLIO

So I said to the eunuch – is that a  
stylus under your toga or are you  
just pleased to see me?

Silence. A cup sails past him.

DROLIO (CONT'D)

My wife says: "Let's vacation  
somewhere the women look like me."  
I say: "Catacombs don't open till  
the Ides." The Ides!

A table gets up to leave.

DROLIO (CONT'D)

Tough crowd. What are you – deaf?

HECKLER (O.S.)

I wish!

DROLIO

Okay, golden oldie: The Republic –  
Rimshot. Groans.

Jo slips onto a stool. A gruff waitress appears.

WAITRESS

Drinking to remember or forget?

JO

Hoping to eat.

WAITRESS

Sure. Anything on the menu.

JO

Where's the menu?

WAITRESS

We don't have one.

JO

Then how do I –

WAITRESS

This is the Subura, pal, not the  
Palatine Grill. Wine?

JO

Red or..?

WAITRESS

Or nothing.

JO

Red. Finest you've got.

WAITRESS

Everyone's a big shot.

Back on stage:

DROLIO

Centurion says try mime. I say, I'm  
a Jew – I don't suffer in silence.

Jug smashes. Chair scrapes. The air sharpens, ready to break.

JO

Is this the comedy or the tragedy?

A brazier tips. The mob stirs.

DROLIO

I was better off in Pompeii. Great  
vacation spot... a little warm, but

–

Then - with violence imminent - a single, pure lyre chord.

It's quiet now. Even the drunks pause.

From the shadows: a voice. Rich, warm, and utterly arresting.  
Every head turns.

It's Vibia, who has been there all along. Not loud, not showy  
- but clear, golden, and full of quiet power. As the song  
progresses, Vibia rises from her seat and walks among the  
patrons: soothing, calming; her song pouring balm on troubled  
waters.

The room hushes. Like a spell has been cast.

VIBIA

(singing)

*It's warm in here -  
The world's outside,  
With its battles  
And its pride.  
But in this room,  
We let that go,  
And find the friends  
We didn't know.  
So take your seat,  
And drop your sword -  
Listen while I strum a chord.  
Tonight, it's just a tale or two,  
A cup of wine that sees us through.  
It's warm in here -  
Come share the flame,  
No one's asking for your name.  
The walls don't judge,  
The chairs don't care,  
And strangers find a welcome there.  
So pour a cup, and rest your fears  
No one leaves with empty ears.  
We can't fix  
All that's wrong out there...  
But we can feel  
A little less alone in here.  
The floorboards creak  
Like they've seen ghosts,  
The wine's too sweet,  
The barkeep boasts.  
But something in the clatter,  
Smoke and song -  
Says this is where  
The hearts belong.  
You sing off-key?  
Then you're in luck -  
We're all just fools  
Who like a mug.  
And maybe, when you  
Raise your glass -  
You'll drink to things  
That come to pass.*

(MORE)

VIBIA (CONT'D)

*It's warm in here –  
 No need to shout,  
 The fire's fed,  
 The rain stays out.  
 A jest, a tune,  
 A shoulder near,  
 Can change the shape  
 Of any year.  
 So stay a while,  
 Don't rush the night,  
 Let laughter, love  
 And joy take flight.  
 If joy is rare  
 And sorrow clear –  
 Then raise it high –  
 it's warm in here.  
 That's all we get –  
 A few good nights.  
 A few good hearts.  
 A few shared lights.  
 And if this is one...  
 Then stay, my dear –  
 It's warm... in here.*

Even Jo is stunned. A drunk sits down slowly, forgetting he was angry. One man starts to weep, but that might be unrelated.

Drolio, now behind the curtain, watches with quiet pride.

As the music fades, the tension breaks. The room breathes again.

Jo sips his drink. Smiles.

JO  
 (to himself)  
 Now that's theatre.

**INT. COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA - NIGHT**

After closing. Vibia wipes a table. Jo approaches, empty mug in hand like it's a peace treaty.

JO  
 I think you just saved the old  
 guy's life.

VIBIA  
 Wouldn't be the first time. He's  
 like an amphora – mostly cracks,  
 none of them wise, but somehow  
 still holds wine.

JO  
 Wait – I know you. Fancy place.  
 Terrifying prices.

VIBIA

You're the schmuck who cried at the wine list. Didn't stay?

JO

Nah. Figured I'd rather buy a villa in Thebes than a Greek salad in that dump.

VIBIA

Smart move.

JO

So what's a talent like you doing in a dive like this?

VIBIA

Rome's expensive. I sling wine uptown, sing for tips down here. Two jobs, same sandals.

JO

Both involve flying dishes?

VIBIA

Only when Drolio's on stage.

JO

Say – any chance there's a room to rent upstairs? And by "rent," I mean –

Her glare cuts him off.

JO (CONT'D)

– or a stable out back? Between addresses.

VIBIA

We're between dishwashers?

JO

Perfect. Two days in Rome and failing up.

VIBIA

(handing him a mop)  
Welcome to the Comedy & Tragedy.  
Start with the latrines.

JO

Comedy or Tragedy?

VIBIA

Tragedy's on the left.

JO

Comedy's worse?

VIBIA  
You got it.

They trade a grin – not romance, but a spark.

JO  
What about Drollo?

VIBIA  
He won't mind. We're kind of a team.

JO  
My condolences.

VIBIA  
Thank you. I'll tell him you're big on the stand-up oratory circuit. Now, less yap, more mop.

Jo shoulders his mop like a pilum and salutes. Vibia smiles.

**EXT. ROMAN FORUM - VARIOUS LOCATIONS - DAY - MONTAGE**

Jo strides into the Forum, notebook in hand, brimming with hope. He passes all the different acts trying – and failing – to charm the crowd.

"INSULA AMORIS SEASON VI: RHODES"

A row of oiled-up, dolled-up dating show contestants loll on couches.

FORUM EMCEE  
So, Lydia... was romance in the air on Rhodes?

LYDIA  
Where?

The hunk beside her flexes. The crowd melts. Jo forces a smile.

"BEAT THE SLAVE" (AMENDED: "NOT LIKE THAT!!")

A clueless patrician squints at a map.

PATRICIAN YOUTH  
Wait, the pyramids are not in Britannia?

Gong. Booming. Jo's smile falters.

"ROME'S NEXT TOP ORATOR"

A sweaty youth bellows Cicero, drops his scroll.

FORUM JUDGE

That was less Cicero... more  
cistern.

The orator sobs. A kid throws a melon. Jo sighs.

"TEMPLE MAKEOVER!"

Two decorators beam at a crumbling shrine.

DECORATOR

Corinthian columns, marble  
accents... so much lapis!

They high-five – and miss.

Jo walks past without slowing, eyes dead ahead.

By the time he's back on the main street, his shoulders have slumped and the notebook is shoved in his belt. He glances around, wondering if the theatre was such a great idea after all.

A quieter part of the Forum. A wizened GRANDMOTHER is gathering a small crowd around an alcove. Once enough punters (not many) have assembled she raises her arms to ask for quiet.

Onto a makeshift dais steps a darling LITTLE GIRL. She is dressed in rags and has smudges on her sweet, open face.

An OLD MAN strums a chord on a battered lyre. The audience holds its breath as she prepares.

Jo finds he his holding his breath too. Then: she begins to sing. Is this the star he seeks?

Beat.

She is terrible. Out of tune, whiny, and unable to remember the words. The audience exchange looks of withering disapproval.

CLOSE UP: LITTLE GIRL SOLDIERING ON

HECKLER (O.S.)

Hey, little girl. (beat) You suck!

Jo looks shocked, but not really, and makes his escape.

**EXT. PUBLIC GARDENS - DUSK**

Jo slumps onto a bench near a fountain: despondent. A couple of stray goats wander past. He sighs, demoralised.

Then – music.

Delicate, odd, charming – an unfamiliar melody drifts through the air, nimble and full of character. Jo perks up. He follows the sound through the hedges.

**EXT. PUBLIC GARDENS - BOWER - DUSK**

Two musicians sit cross-legged in the grass:

One – white, lanky, pale, with a mop of red curls – plucks a lyre far too big for him. The other – black, short, built like a barrel – strums a tiny lute like it owes him money. They sing beautifully.

CASTOR

(singing)

*We sing of fair Nero,  
A god not a churl -  
The hair of Apollo,  
The lips of a girl.*

POLLUX

(singing)

*He stands in the Forum  
Each day as we pass.  
Just say you adore him -  
He'll show you his...*

Jo steps forward. They stop.

JO

I've spent all day looking for talent in Rome. Up till now, the jury was out. (beat, sincerely) You two are good.

They grin up at him.

CASTOR

Of course we are. We're twins.

POLLUX

Harmonising since the womb.

JO

But you're... um, not identical?

CASTOR

Tall, ginger, devastatingly handsome.

POLLUX

Short, dark, built like a stonemason's lunchbox.

JO

(still dubious)

So – fraternal?

POLLUX  
No. Identical.

CASTOR  
Mother said so.

Jo smiles unconvincingly.

CASTOR (CONT'D)  
I'm Castor – music.

POLLUX  
And I'm Pollux – words.

JO  
Wait... Castor and Poll-

POLLUX  
Yeah, we've heard all the jokes,  
mate.

JO  
Josephus.

POLLUX  
(not mocking, just  
observing)  
Josephus the Jew?

JO  
The "Jew" is usually silent.

CASTOR  
Huh. Not in my experience.

JO  
True. Anyway – I'm putting on a  
show. I need writers, songs...  
spark. I think I just found it.

CASTOR/POLLUX  
We're in.

JO  
That was quick.

POLLUX  
We were starving artists.

CASTOR  
Now we're just artists. (beat)  
Still starving, though.

JO  
Come on. I know a taberna.

They stroll off into the dusk, chatting. The twins break into a silly harmony as Jo smiles for the first time in days.

**INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - DAY**

The palace is luxurious, gleaming, and heavy with gold accents. Nero, lounging on an ornate throne, looks smug and excited. He's holding a scroll and waving it in the air dramatically. Thrasea stands by his side, scribbling notes quickly, his face a picture of careful composure.

NERO

I've decided, Thrasea, to celebrate... me, naturally. I shall host the greatest spectacle Rome - the world! - has ever seen.

THRASEA

A spectacle, sire? How... interesting.

NERO

A competition. And I shall call it... "Nero's Got Talent!"

THRASEA

Catchy. Though... perhaps something more, uh... inclusive? Less about you, more about the Empire?

NERO

Less about me? My dear Thrasea, I am the Empire.

THRASEA

Of course, Caesar. Still - the mob likes to feel included. Perhaps "Rome's Got Talent"? A gift from you to them.

NERO

Hmm. "Rome's Got Talent." Broad. Generous. Almost as if I thought of it myself.

THRASEA

Inspired, sire.

NERO

Naturally. And the winner will have riches, fame, glory... and the privilege of serving me. In short, he will become a legend.

THRASEA

Or "she," perhaps?

NERO

(beat)  
Can you imagine?

Nero and Thrasea both laugh, but there's a flicker in Nero's eyes – a reminder that he's not someone to cross.

THRASEA

This battle of artistic titans will be remembered for generations, mighty Caesar. But who will claim the golden laurel? Oh, the suspense.

NERO

Yes, yes – isn't it thrilling? Now then, Thrasea, summon everyone. Everyone! Designers, architects, cooks, jugglers – mimes!

THRASEA

(sotto voce)  
I hate mime.

NERO

It's going to be a triumph!  
(beat, fretting suddenly)  
But what am I going to wear..?  
Primula? Primula! My swatches!

Nero bustles off, already shouting for attendants. Thrasea exhales – relieved.

NERO (CONT'D)

(popping back in,  
startling him)  
One more thing –

THRASEA

Yes, Caesar?

NERO

I need a theatre. A proper one. Cheap, but spectacular. Outside the Temple of Minerva, I think?

THRASEA

Where the orphanage is?

NERO

Where the orphanage was.

THRASEA

Consider it done, sire.

NERO

Splendid. (beat, shooing) But you're still here. Bricks, tiles, columns... cushions – something tasteful but imperial. You'll figure it out.

THRASEA

Of course, Caesar. Already on it.  
All over it.

Nero sweeps away again. Thrasea sighs, muttering:

THRASEA (CONT'D)

Nero bestrides the world... I order  
throw pillows.

**EXT. FIELD OF MARS - DUSK**

A dusty, half-abandoned parade ground. Tents, cracked training gear, and a broken statue of Mars – pigeon perched smugly on his head.

Castor and Pollux sit on crates, trying to coax music from a two-stringed lyre and a wine-jug drum.

CASTOR

You can't just hit the beat – you  
have to feel it.

POLLUX

I'm about to feel it upside your  
head.

Jo paces, toga filthy, hair chaos, eyes blazing. He sketches frantic diagrams in the dirt with a stick.

JO

Alright, gather up. We're still  
missing one vital ingredient for a  
great theatre company – namely, a  
show. Big. Dazzling. Epic. No cheap  
tricks, no surprise appearances – I  
want epic.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Epic's our specialty, darling.

Jo spins – stunned. Fabianus, Silvia, and Gemellus stand there, dusty from the road.

JO

Fabianus! Silvia! Oh... Gemellus.  
You as well. What the Hecuba are  
you three doing in Rome?

SILVIA

Heard you were up to something  
delicious, so we simply dashed up  
the Appian Way. Made wonderful time  
– eight days.

FABIANUS

We've been playing Brundisium: "An Evening with Helen of Troy."

GEMELLUS

Silvia was Helen.

Jo gives him a look.

They all hug, chatter overlapping. Castor and Pollux eye the newcomers.

CASTOR

You actors?

SILVIA

Survivors, darling. Old troupers with a few more leagues before the fields of Elysium embrace us.

POLLUX

They're actors all right.

CASTOR

Yup.

Jo gathers everyone close and crouches to draw in the dirt. He's speaking fast now, caught up in the rhythm of the idea.

JO

Okay, listen up. I've got an idea. Picture this: desert province, power-mad governor – Tiberius meets Caligula meets the uncle you weren't allowed to go to the baths with.

VIBIA

(shuddering)

Uncle Lucian.

GEMELLUS

(shuddering)

Uncle Fredo.

JO

There's this kid – farm-born, orphan, no idea he's descended from a mighty warrior. Destined to be a hero. He meets an old hermit – ex-priest from some kooky sect, like the... no offence, Vibia – like the Christians. Using his magical power; not power... um, "force" – yeah – they team up with gladiators, thieves, slaves, nobles. A rebel alliance, if you will.

(MORE)

JO (CONT'D)

Their mission: steal the plans for  
the villain's sky-fortress: giant  
weapon, rains fire from the  
mountaintop.

CASTOR

This sounds familiar...

JO

Shut up, Castor. There's a sword  
fight with swords... made out of  
lutes. Lute sabres! A talking  
monkey! A chariot chase through the  
market!

POLLUX

Lemme guess: the evil governor  
turns out to be the boy's father?

JO

No, that's the henchman with  
asthma. Destiny and daddy issues,  
am I right?

FABIANUS

Inspired, darling. I am that  
monkey.

POLLUX

It's good Jo, but that's basically  
Disneus' touring show.

CASTOR

"Bella Stellaria".

POLLUX

Yeah. A bunch of stars fighting  
wars.

JO

Never heard of it. Moving on.

SILVIA

Beautiful princess? Very  
distinctive hair?

JO

So?

VIBIA

You're not worried about Disneus  
calling in the lawyers?

JO

Lawyers? Never gonna happen. Old  
Disneus is as timid as a mouse.

Jo looks nervously to camera. Then he gets back to the task at hand.

JO (CONT'D)

Okay, everyone listen up.

(weighted pause)

My friends, we stand on the brink of greatness...

GEMELLUS

(interrupting)

I thought this was the brink of the Campus Martius?

JO

Not now, Gemellus.

Gemellus gestures his apologies. A silence descends on our players. The sun is setting; casting beams of golden light on their yearning faces. Jo stands before them: not a schlub now, but a great general on the eve of battle.

JO (CONT'D)

Not since Hannibal crossed the Alps. Not since Cleopatra fell on her asp. Not since Julius Caesar took audience feedback a little too personally... we, my friends, we are about to dazzle Rome like it has never been dazzled before. They'll come for blood and glory - they'll leave with their jaws on the floor. They'll tell their friends, their enemies, their eunuchs, their courtesans, their goats, their kids. And when that curtain rises - metaphorically, because we can't afford one - they'll see something they never expected: us. Renegades, (to Castor and Pollux) street mountebanks... (to Vibia) food service professionals, (to Gemellus) morons, washed-up has-beens...

FABIANUS

(bowing)

Thank you.

JO

...and two men who think they're twins because their mother told them so, despite all evidence to the contrary. Like the fact they're not the same age. (beat) But hey - this is Rome - and the world watches what Rome applauds.

Jo pauses and looks at his ragged troupe of players and misfits. He has the gleam in his eye all great leaders have. He pauses before continuing -

JO (CONT'D)

We few. We crappy few. We too are an empire, my friends: a rainbow empire of affordable talent. Jew, Christian, pagan, the aforementioned moron... standing together with only our hearts, our talent, and several overdue rental costumes to our name. Others will come at us with everything they've got. But if they strike at our little empire -  
 (big beat)  
 - the empire strikes back!

Castor raises his hand.

JO (CONT'D)

Shut up, Castor!

**INT. LAVISH ATRIUM - DAY**

A white-haired patrician in gold robes and total silence sits on a curule chair. Jo gestures wildly at architectural drawings, waving props around.

JO

It's spectacle! It's satire! It's civic uplift with sequins!

The patrician sips wine and yawns.

**INT. TABERNA BACKROOM - DAY**

A middle-class moneylender and a bored bookkeeper taking notes.

JO

Think Sextus meets Labia with the thrusting pulse of unbridled Dionysian ecstasy.

VIBIA

(aside, to Jo)

That sounds way dirtier than it did in rehearsal.

JO

I'll get my toga.

**EXT. STREET-CORNER TABLE - DAY**

A toothless CRONE counts coins. Chickens cluck nearby.

JO  
It's like a Passion play... but  
with even more laughs!

She offers them a single egg. Jo bows. Vibia pockets it.

**INT. DANK BASEMENT ROOM - DAY**

A hooded man leans forward. No visible face.

JO  
We call it "Blood and Thunder:  
Roman Rampage."

VIBIA  
Working title.

A knife is slammed into the table beside them. They leave quickly.

**EXT. ROMAN FORUM - DAY**

Jo delivers the his pitch to a group of off-screen listeners.

JO  
Picture it: the stage goes black. A  
single beam - okay, torch - alights  
on our hero. The crowd holds its  
breath. Then - BANG - dancing  
lions, live music, social  
commentary that doesn't feel  
preachy...  
(beat)  
It's theatre that makes you feel.  
It's theatre that makes you think.  
But most of all, it's theatre  
that...

He notices something off-camera and falters.

JO (CONT'D)  
Uh... that maybe isn't for  
everyone.

They are pitching to a group of chained slaves, necks  
collared, seated in rows waiting to be auctioned.

A guard shrugs.

GUARD  
Meh. They got nothing but time.

VIBIA  
 (patting Jo on the  
 shoulder)  
 I mean: you basically had them till  
 the lions.

**INT. GLADIATOR TRAINING YARD - DUSK**

The yard is quiet. Torches gutter along the colonnade.  
 Scattered practice swords glint in the fading light.

Attalus sits on a stone bench, armour battered, staring at  
 his calloused hands like they belong to someone else.

From far off: the muffled roar of the arena. Another match.  
 Another kill. Another cheer that already means nothing.

PARACLES (O.S.)  
 You should be in there, pal -  
 they're chanting your name louder  
 than Nero's.

ATTALUS  
 Let them. They don't even know what  
 they're cheering for.

PARACLES  
 They're cheering for a winner. You  
 want meaning? Buy a scroll. You  
 want love? Buy a dog. You want  
 glory? Keep hitting people til they  
 stop moving.

ATTALUS  
 Glory? You said Metrobius could  
 silence a whole theatre with a  
 whisper.

PARACLES  
 (rolling his eyes)  
 Here we go...

ATTALUS  
 That's what I want. Something  
 human. Something that doesn't end  
 with a guy's intestines making a  
 run for the exit.

PARACLES  
 Pah! Art's for poets and sissies.  
 You're a gladiator, baby. Big  
 muscles, bad temper - the whole  
 package.

ATTALUS  
 Maybe I don't belong here anymore.

PARACLES

Where you gonna go, huh? You think the theatre's waiting for you with a fruit basket? You're not an actor – you're a weapon with legs. A very impressive set of legs, sure, but still.

ATTALUS

Then I'll find someone who can help me to put down the blade.

PARACLES

And what am I supposed to do without my favourite meal ticket, huh?

They share the faintest smile – a flicker of warmth under all the barbs.

Paracles claps him on the shoulder and walks away, muttering to himself.

Attalus stays in the torchlight, alone, listening to the distant roar fade.

ATTALUS

(singing)

*They cheer when I enter,  
They call out my name,  
For blood in the dust,  
For the thrill of the game.  
They love how I conquer,  
They love what I am –  
But I hear something deeper  
Than blood and than sand.  
I want a different kind of glory,  
A light that doesn't fade,  
A voice that finds the silence,  
A truth that won't betray.  
I want to tell my story,  
I want to take my stand,  
I want to leave behind me  
More than blood and sand.  
I've seen how a whisper  
Can quiet a room,  
How one honest feeling  
Can break through the gloom.  
No crash of the battle,  
No shout from the crowd  
Just one human moment,  
Alive and unbowed.  
I want to stand in that stillness,  
I want to speak and stay,  
I want to move a heart  
By what I choose to say.  
I want to tell my story,  
I want to take my stand,  
(MORE)*

ATTALUS (CONT'D)

*I want to be remembered  
For more than blood and sand.  
What if these hands,  
Made only for war,  
Could carry a dream,  
Could open a door?  
What if this voice,  
Buried under the cry,  
Could rise through the darkness  
And finally fly?  
What if the man  
They summon with cheers  
Is only the shadow  
I've worn all these years?  
What if the life  
I have never yet known  
Is waiting before me –  
And still can be my own?  
I want a different kind of glory,  
Not won by fear or shame,  
But something true and living  
That no one else can name.  
I want to stand in the light  
And be more than I have been,  
To find the part within me  
That has waited to begin.  
I want to matter truly.  
I want to finally live.  
I want to be more than strength  
alone,  
More than the blows I give.  
So let the old world keep  
Its triumph and its noise –  
I will choose the truer road.  
I will lift my voice.  
I want to tell my story.  
I want to take my stand.  
I want a different kind of glory.  
I want more than blood and sand.*

From the shadows steps JUGURTHA (50s) – a huge, grizzled Numidian trainer. Leathered skin. A face carved by decades in the sun. Missing an ear and three fingers. He speaks rarely – but when he does, men listen.

JUGURTHA

You seek Metrobius?

ATTALUS

You know where he is?

JUGURTHA

I guarded his villa. Long ago. He paid in gold and praise – and never enough of either.

ATTALUS

I thought he was dead.

JUGURTHA

Just shut away. Big place North of Volaterrae. Smells of olives and tragedy.

ATTALUS

You think he'd see me?

JUGURTHA

Maybe. He likes broken things with potential. All great actors do. But ask yourself: what do you really want from him?

ATTALUS

I've had enough applause bought in blood. I want to earn it a better way.

Attalus unstraps his sword belt, places it gently on the bench. A quiet beat.

JUGURTHA

Then you'll need courage, my friend. And better shoes. You've got arena feet.

ATTALUS

I've got heart. I can borrow the shoes. What I need is a guide.

JUGURTHA

We leave at dawn.

**INT. COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA - BACK ROOM - NIGHT**

Low lamplight. Mood flat. Jo sits at the table, head in hands. Castor and Pollux bicker over a broken lyre. Fabianus sews a tunic with a fish bone. Silvia naps on a couch.

JO

Well, here we are - back at square one. A cast with one foot in the underworld. A singing waitress. The Empire's worst stand-up. Even the twins are starting to realise they're not related.

CASTOR

Lies.

POLLUX

Don't listen to him... brother.

They hug.

FABIANUS

We need something, Jo. Fast.

SILVIA

You need an actor.

JO

I've got actors. Too many. I need someone who walks on stage and makes the whole world disappear.

SILVIA

You need "him".

The room stills. Drolio glances up, unreadable.

CASTOR

She's delirious again.

POLLUX

Last time she thought she was the Muses. All of them.

JO

Silvia -

SILVIA

I'm not joking. I knew him.

JO

Knew who?

SILVIA

Metrobius. My first director. We did Phaedra in Syracuse. He said my death scene made him weep bitter tears of gall. Gods, I was awful. But him? Magnificent.

FABIANUS

Why didn't you tell us, darling?

SILVIA

Because he terrified me. Because I adored him. And because I never thought I'd see another stage worthy of him.

JO

You think he'd help?

SILVIA

He'll say no.

JO

Encouraging.

SILVIA

But he'll listen. He's in the hills  
above Volaterrae. Left Rome after  
his 'Cassius' - one night only, so  
raw and honest the whole city wept.  
Soldiers. Plebs. Slaves. Next  
morning some senator quoted it as a  
joke in court; got a big laugh.  
Metrobius never spoke another line.  
Said if Rome couldn't tell truth  
from parody, it deserved neither.

They all sit with that a moment.

JO

Then we go. At dawn. Take who we  
can, get what we need. If we fail -  
let's fail in front of the best.

FABIANUS

A toast, then.

Wine is poured.

FABIANUS (CONT'D)

To our little company. And to our  
leader - not just our leader: our  
soul.

ALL

To Josephus. Our soul.

Jo looks insulted. Castor and Pollux snigger.

DROLIO

Room for me in the cart?

JO

(suspicious)  
Sure...

Beat.

**INT. COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA - ROOF - NIGHT**

Jo - unable to sleep has come up to the roof of the taberna  
to think. The gorgeous vista of Rome beneath the moon  
surrounds him.

JO

(singing)  
*At the sunrise,  
In that moment,  
As the day wakes  
To begin,  
When the dark gives up  
Its hold around you,  
(MORE)*

JO (CONT'D)

*And the light comes  
Slowly in -  
When the last doubt  
Still surrounds you,  
When your strength is  
Paper-thin,  
When you only know  
You cannot stay there,  
And you feel it  
Deep within -  
At dawn,  
There's a world we've yet to find.  
At dawn,  
We step out of what's behind.  
At dawn,  
All the hope we've held in secret  
Meets the fear we cannot hide.  
And we rise,  
Or we fall,  
But we face it  
At dawn.*

**EXT. CAMPUS MARTIUS ARENA - NIGHT**

Attalus - unable to sleep has come up to the deserted arena to think. The empty seats are silent and the moon shines on the vast, sandy expanse.

ATTALUS

*At the sunrise,  
In that stillness,  
When the old life  
Loses claim,  
There's a silence  
Full of asking  
Who you are  
Beyond your name.  
I have lived  
Inside an echo,  
In a life not wholly mine.  
If I follow,  
I may lose all  
That the world has said  
I am -  
But I cannot spend my whole life  
As the shadow of that man.  
So at dawn,  
When the sky begins to open,  
At dawn,  
When the edges all grow clear,  
At dawn,  
Something calls us from the  
silence,  
And we know that it is here.*

INTERCUT: JO ON THE ROOF AND ATTALUS IN THE ARENA:

JO/ATTALUS

(singing)

*At dawn,  
With our rags and with our scars,  
At dawn,  
With our fear and with our hearts,  
At dawn,  
With the dream we hardly dare to  
trust  
Still burning through the dark -*

JO

(singing)

*Not with answers -*

ATTALUS

(singing)

*Not with armour -*

JO

(singing)

*Not with anything but nerve -*

ATTALUS

(singing)

*Only with the will to walk on -*

JO/ATTALUS

(singing)

*Only with the heart to serve.  
At dawn!  
We are more than what has been!  
At dawn!  
Something new can still begin!  
At dawn!*

JO

(singing)

*All the fear and all the cost*

ATTALUS

(singing)

*Meet the hope that brought us on!*

JO/ATTALUS

(singing)

*And we rise,  
And we choose,  
And we leave behind the night  
At dawn!  
At dawn!*

ATTALUS

(singing)

*When success and failure wait*

JO  
 (singing)  
*Like two shadows side by side!*

JO/ATTALUS  
 (singing)  
*At dawn!  
 Still we go and still we dare  
 With our hearts flung open wide!  
 At dawn!  
 We may lose what we have known!  
 At dawn!  
 We may stand and stand alone!  
 But to stay here in the darkness  
 Would be loss before we've gone!*

JO  
 (singing)  
*So we rise,*

ATTALUS  
 (singing)  
*And we choose,*

JO/ATTALUS  
 (singing)  
*And we leave behind the night -  
 At dawn!  
 At dawn!  
 At dawn.*

**EXT. MUNICIPAL STABLES - DAY**

First light. Attalus and Jugurtha move in perfect, wordless sync – saddles slapped down, buckles snapping, blades sheathed, cloaks tossed. Jugurtha swings into the saddle; Attalus follows, every inch the bronze statue of destiny.

They ride. Smooth. Effortless. Epic.

**EXT. COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA - DAY**

Jo's crew faces their transport: a leaning ox-cart already halfway to retirement.

Jo lifts a basket of supplies – the bottom falls out, everything smashes.

Drolio shrugs, steps over it.

Gemellus clutches his special blanket, barely awake. Vibia eyes the wheel like it's plotting against her. Fabianus lifts Silvia into the cart with courtly care.

Castor and Pollux rush in, dumping a mountain of script scrolls onto Jo.

**INT. ROADSIDE TABERNA - NIGHT**

Attalus and Jugurtha sip wine at a busy village inn.

A row of village girls gaze at Attalus, sighing.

At the end of the line, a shy farmhand bats his eyelashes – awkward, but earnest.

Attalus grins and raises his cup; Jugurtha chuckles, clapping him on the back.

**INT. DIFFERENT ROADSIDE TABERNA - NIGHT**

Jo counts coins. Not enough.

The tavern owner glares.

Drolio steps up like a hero onto a wobbly bench... and launches into the worst comedy set in ancient history.

Dead stares. A cabbage sails past his head.

**EXT. FARM VILLAGE - NIGHT**

The gang sprints from the tavern, clutching packs – as a torch-wielding mob gives chase.

GEMELLUS

(shouting)

Why are they so angry?!

POLLUX

(to Drolio)

I hate you, old man!

**EXT. ROADSIDE CAMP - NIGHT**

Attalus and Jugurtha relax by a perfect little campfire. Jugurtha sharpens a dagger; Attalus reclines, wearing a flower crown. Their tent is immaculate.

**EXT. FIELD - NIGHT**

Jo's gang stand, staring in unison – at their tent: a blazing inferno.

The friendly ox chews stoically. Gemellus pats him.

**EXT. CRESTING HILL - DAY**

Attalus and Jugurtha on horseback, gazing down at a lush Tuscan valley.

**EXT. DIFFERENT HILL - DAY**

Jo's ox-cart finally limps into view of the same valley. The gang cheers – just as the axle snaps and the cart tilts.

JO  
We're close.

DROLIO  
My bladder disagrees.

Wide aerial – both parties approaching a magnificent villa from opposite roads. Destiny in stucco and marble.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - TUSCAN HILLS - DAY**

The villa glows in the midday sun – marble colonnades, terraced pools, white peacocks strutting through citrus groves. The sculptures tread the thin line between tasteful and indictable.

Attalus and Jugurtha crest the hill on horseback – dusty, imposing, and entirely out of place against all this refinement. They dismount. Attalus adjusts his cloak like he owns the place; Jugurtha whistles low at the grandeur.

As they near the gates –

GALLA (O.S.)  
Not so fast, plough-pullers.

From nowhere emerges GALLA, early 50s, robes starched enough to cut glass, eyes like two tiny spears. The sort of woman who can make a marble statue apologise for existing.

GALLA (CONT'D)  
If you don't have an invitation, an appointment, or an absurdly overpriced gift basket, you're trespassing.

ATTALUS  
We've travelled a long way.

GALLA  
The Via Appia's a long way, oaf. It's also filthy, rancid, and I can tell from here you've brought half of it on your boots.

Jugurtha bristles, stepping forward.

GALLA (CONT'D)  
Save the show, Numidian. I've seen plenty of musclemen – all promise on the posters, nothing in the ring.

She sweeps past them, inspecting their horses like they're stray dogs.

GALLA (CONT'D)

So, what is it? Selling something?  
Lost? Or just hoping the master  
will take in a couple of strays out  
of the goodness of his heart -  
which, between us, would fit nicely  
inside an olive pit.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - LOWER PATH - DAY**

A very different arrival. Jo, Vibia, Drolio, Fabianus, Silvia and Gemellus trudge up the dusty path toward the villa, led by the friendly ox pulling their battered cart.

They all pause as the full scale of the villa's grandeur sinks in.

VIBIA

Holy Minerva!

JO

Would you get a load of that?

DROLIO

I've acted on sets less expensive  
than... this gatepost.

GEMELLUS

(sniffing the air)  
Is that... scented steam?

VIBIA

More like scented staff.

They glance over as a gaggle of suspiciously beautiful young men - all buff and bronzed - pass by elegantly, carrying amphorae and trays of canapés to groups of patrician guests. Each one of them looks like he models for mosaics on weekends.

GEMELLUS

I kinda like it here.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - COURTYARD - DAY**

Both groups arrive at the front steps at the same time, from different directions. They clock each other - Jo's crew dust-covered, sunburnt, slightly ruffled. Attalus and Jugurtha glistening like campaign posters.

There's a moment of mutual sizing up.

DROLIO

Look at those shoulders! I mean, he could be Attalus!

VIBIA

(not looking at Attalus)  
Never seen him before.

GEMELLUS

Do you guys think I should I say hi to the staff? Or let them come to me, or..?

Everyone ignores him.

**INT. VILLA METROBIUS - ATRIUM - DAY**

Galla plants herself squarely between the visitors and a grand set of double doors.

GALLA

Master Metrobius does not receive unsolicited visitors. He is an artist. A sensitive one. He's been meditating. Also - napping.

JO

Tell him it's about a show. One that might finally be worthy of his name. And we need to see him before... what's your name, pal?

ATTALUS

Uh... my name is... um -

GEMELLUS

I have this problem too, friend.

ATTALUS

My name is... Glorian.  
(to Galla)

I come prostrate to beseech audience of the high priest of Thespis.

JUGURTHA

Why are you talking like that?

ATTALUS

I have no idea. Isn't that how actors talk?

Jugurtha shrugs.

GALLA

Wonderful. A travelling theatre company for the clinically bewildered, and a himbo having a mid-life crisis. This will be fun.

She exhales, turns with unnecessary grandeur, and sweeps through the double doors.

The group waits. Fountains gurgle. A peacock squawks.

VIBIA

If he doesn't let us in, we're camping in the hedge, I guess.

DROLIO

I've camped in worse. I once did The Trojan Women in a brothel in Syracuse.

(beat)

A male brothel.

Vibia gives him a withering look.

JO

We'll be fine. He'll see us. I can feel it.

GEMELLUS

(eyeing a passing beauty)

Or... we could just stay here a little bit..?

The double doors part with solemn ceremony.

A hush falls.

Galla returns, flanked by two gorgeous Nubian retainers. One of the retainers strikes a golden gong suspended between ivory horns.

All hold their breath. Then:

Enter METROBIUS (80s). He wears a flowing deep-purple tunic, embroidered with gold thread – effortlessly theatrical but somehow not ridiculous. He moves like a man who knows every eye is on him – because it always has been.

His hair is immaculately arranged and his bearing is pure old-school tragedian. He radiates command.

He speaks with that perfect actor's cadence – every syllable sculpted; every breath a cue.

METROBIUS

(to Galla)

You said there were pilgrims?

GALLA

I said there were intruders.

METROBIUS

Same thing. Depends on whether or not they brought figs.

(turning)

Well then... what motley assortment of broken dreams and sunburnt ambition do I see before me? You've journeyed here for what, exactly? Wisdom? Instruction? Blessing? Or merely to gaze upon the mortal husk of the profession's last... and greatest hope? (beat) Very well. Gaze.

The throws his arms wide, a tableau in sandals and glamour.

JO

(stepping forward)

We came, sir, because we're putting on a show. Something new. Something... Roman.

METROBIUS

A bold claim. The last "new idea" in the theatre gave us mime. And we all know how that turned out.

GEMELLUS

(sotto voce)

I hate mime.

VIBIA

It's a winner, sir. And it's good. Or... it will be.

METROBIUS

And who, precisely, are you?

JO

We're players. Writers. Dreamers. And one really, really bad stand-up.

DROLIO

I'm not saying I'm lousy, but last time I killed, it was in the arena. The arena...

A small tumbleweed drifts gently past. Crickets chirp.

JO

We're building a company the old-fashioned way, sir. Heart, passion... absolutely no cash.

METROBIUS

Ah, the best way. (beat) Do you know what Rome took from me? Not fame. Not fortune. I still have both, in embarrassing excess. It took meaning. When I performed 'Cassius' (pause for acknowledgement), a woman in the fourth row wept so hard she could had to be carried from the auditorium. A fat senator cried as though mourning for all the shades of Hades. The city sobbed. It applauded. Then... it forgot. A week later, the Emperor quoted my dying speech while guzzling dormice at a tawdry banquet. They laughed. (quietly) I left.

GALLA

And still they come, master. Squeezing every drop of your immortal gift like so many grapes.

METROBIUS

I cannot stem the tide, Galla. Merely decide whether to build a stage... or a wall.

He turns back to Jo and Attalus.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

You want something of me? Say it plain - before I return to my lamentations over what is lost in me to Art.

The room is quiet after Metrobius's challenge:

JO

I do, sir. But -  
(he looks around)  
- this isn't quite the right space.

METROBIUS

(eyebrow lifting)  
No?

JO

Your atrium is magnificent, but the acoustics are too round, and the floor's too wide. You lose intimacy. We'll need somewhere with shape. Containment. Implied focus. A stage, perhaps?

METROBIUS

Containment?

(impressed)

You're not entirely untrained, are you?

JO

Self-taught, sir, but I know when something isn't right.

METROBIUS

(aside to Galla)

He knows the stage. I grow curious.

(turning back, grandly)

Very well. Let us adjourn to the only part of this estate more precious to me than my glittering reputation.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - AMPHITHEATRE - DAY**

The group assembles in the sun-drenched stone bowl of Metrobius's private theatre – carved from marble and shaded by olive trees. It seats no more than fifty, but every line is perfect, every angle honed for performance.

Metrobius takes a seat in the centre of the front row – arms folded, eyes sharp.

Jo stands in the dirt stage, suddenly aware of the weight of the moment.

Behind him, Vibia, Drollo, and Gemellus hover like a back-up band.

Jugurtha leans against a pillar, arms crossed.

Attalus remains at the edge of the scene – watching.

JO

(clears his throat)

Right.

(suddenly shy, then pushing through)

Rome thinks it's seen it all. Chariot races, blood, lions, blood, long speeches about duty, and blood. Whole lotta blood, basically. But what if the thing they haven't seen is... themselves? A story that's Roman not because it has togas and emperors, but because it understands the very nature of Rome itself. Glory. Ego. Tragedy. Past, present and future. And a tiny flicker of something beyond all that: something nobler.

GEMELLUS

Also trees.

DROLIO

And lightning. And gods. Possibly exploding gods?

JO

(to Gemellus and Drolio)

Don't help.

(pressing on)

"The Fall of Fire." A myth. A spectacle. A play to stir every Roman heart - slave or senator. It begins... with Prometheus - not just stealing fire from the gods - but handing it to mankind; knowing it could destroy them, but loving them so much, he gives the secret of the gods away.

VIBIA

(whispering to Jo)

What happened to "the empire strikes back"?

JO

(whispering)

I got a scroll from Disneus' lawyer before we left the city. Change of plans.

Metrobius clears his throat dramatically.

JO (CONT'D)

Where was I? Oh yes, Prometheus brings fire, but he also brings...

Jo realises he doesn't know where he's going with this new story, and flounders.

VIBIA

... choice. A single figure on stage, offered power or sacrifice. And he chooses to give it all up... for the people.

JO

For humanity. For Rome.

(pause)

And yes, there's a role for you. Not just any role. The role. The one only you can play. Prometheus. A man who knows what it is to be admired and alone. To be the last light in a darkened world.

METROBIUS

The last light - the people - the fire.

(genuinely moved for the first time)

When do we open?

JO

Um... (inventing a date) Twelve days.

METROBIUS

(beat)

That is both impossibly soon and exactly the right amount of time.

(to Galla)

Bring me my notes on acoustics and a glass of Etruscan red. (quietly)

Not the cheap stuff we serve to guests. (to all) We start at dawn.

DROLIO

Again with the dawn? Oy.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - TRAINING FIELD - DAY**

Attalus/Glorian and Gemellus spar with wooden swords.

Gemellus over-swings, stumbles - Attalus catches him, grinning, and gives him a gentle shove.

Gemellus beams like he's just won a war.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - AMPHITHEATRE - DAY**

Jo, Castor, and Pollux hunch over a table buried in scrolls.

Jo pitches, arms windmilling.

Castor and Pollux talk over each other, scribbling furiously - then ripping it all up.

Pollux mimes being on fire; Castor "stabs" a scroll into a melon.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - GARDEN - DAY**

Vibia, hair tied back, hauls props. Attalus/Glorian appears, takes a bundle with a smirk.

She arches an eyebrow. He says something dumb. She punches his arm.

He rubs it, faux-wounded. She relents, brushes his cheek, walks off.

That smile again – softer. He's doomed.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - BALCONY - NIGHT**

Fabianus and Silvia sip wine, feet up.

SILVIA  
(quietly, fond)  
Here we go again.

Below: Castor runs across the courtyard on fire, Pollux chases with a bucket. Jo takes notes.

At the far end, Metrobius watches, misty-eyed.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - AMPHITHEATRE - NIGHT**

Metrobius alone on stage, arms wide mid-speech – then leaning on a column, breathless. Silvia watches him. He catches her eye and suddenly remembers the young actress she was. They embrace.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - TRAINING FIELD - NIGHT**

Gemellus lifts weights under moonlight. Attalus/Glorian tosses him a towel.

They sit in silence. Gemellus sneaks a glance.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN  
(eyes on the stars)  
Big night coming.

Gemellus nods – eyes only for him.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - OLIVE GROVE - NIGHT**

Stars blaze. Cicadas hum. Attalus/Glorian sits on a low bench, shirt loose, shoulders slack. Far off, torchlight flickers in the amphitheatre.

Vibia approaches, carrying a small jug of wine and two plain cups.

VIBIA  
Rough day, huh? Playing "let's pretend"?

ATTALUS/GLORIAN  
(laughs softly)  
You think that's what I'm doing?

VIBIA

I think it's what you've always  
been doing.

She sits, pours wine.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN

You make a habit of roaming around  
with wine?

VIBIA

Old habit. At least I didn't spill  
it on you this time.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN

That was you!?

VIBIA

You remember.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN

I remember... you, some dumb hood  
with an attitude and ... and a  
cross - here.

He takes her wrist, revealing the tattoo.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN (CONT'D)

What does it mean?

VIBIA

Lots of things. For me - second  
chances. Not being chained to your  
past. Believing people can be  
better.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN

I like that.

VIBIA

Yeah. (beat) Well, get some sleep,  
big guy. Jo will lose it if you  
show up with bags under those  
brooding eyes. If he didn't, it'd  
be a miracle.

He still holds her wrist.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN

What's a miracle?

VIBIA

A miracle?

(beat)

When something impossible happens.  
Something that changes everything.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN  
Sounds frightening.

VIBIA  
Sometimes. Also: wonderful.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN  
You believe that?

VIBIA  
I do. If I didn't, I wouldn't be here. Neither would you.

He lets her go, but his hand lingers near hers.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN  
You make it sound easy.

VIBIA  
It's not. It's terrifying. But fear's sometimes the price of admission.

She stands, dusts her skirt, crooked smile.

VIBIA (CONT'D)  
You're good at pretending, big guy. Maybe try being real?

ATTALUS/GLORIAN  
With you?

VIBIA  
Easy, tiger. Start with yourself.

She turns to leave.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN  
What if I mess it up?

VIBIA  
Then we'll be in the same boat. But at least we'll be rowing together.

A wink - not coy, just true.

VIBIA (CONT'D)  
Goodnight, "Glorian."

She disappears into the shadows, leaving him looking at his hand - then at the stars.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - GARDEN TERRACE - NIGHT**

The hills are bathed in the last light of day. Crickets begin their chorus. Gemellus is walking, overflowing with feelings.

He notices Metrobius sitting alone nearby, wrapped in a light cloak, sipping a dark wine. The garden around him is quiet, full of old stone and late roses. Gemellus approaches hesitantly.

GEMELLUS

Hi, sir.

METROBIUS

Good evening, dear boy. You look like you've come to ask something but haven't yet found the shape of the question.

GEMELLUS

I was just walking. Thought I might get some air.

METROBIUS

Yes, that's usually what I tell people. Come. Sit.

GEMELLUS

Sir, did you... did you ever love someone who didn't love you back?

METROBIUS

(long pause)

Much worse. I loved a man who did.

GEMELLUS

What did you do?

METROBIUS

We made a life together... until...

Beat.

GEMELLUS

Did it stop hurting?

METROBIUS

No. But the pain changed its complexion. It became something I could carry. And wouldn't sacrifice.

He swirls his wine.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

He was reckless, brilliant, bold: Rome's greatest general. The kind of man who never realised just how brightly he burned. I told him: you'll either break every heart in Rome or get yourself killed. (beat) He did both.

(MORE)

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

The wrong enemies, the wrong night,  
the wrong alleyway and ... well.  
(beat) But I wouldn't give up one  
second of my life with him. Not  
one. Not the joy, not the tears.  
Not for all the gold in Egypt. You  
don't just get the easy scenes, my  
boy. Not if what you have is real.

GEMELLUS

What if I'm not brave enough?

METROBIUS

Then act as if you are. That's what  
we do, isn't it? We actors.

Gemellus smiles at the flattery.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

Listen, child. The gods don't  
always give us the ending we ask  
for, but they often give us the  
ending we need.

He reaches over and gently runs a hand through Gemellus's  
hair – like a genial grandfather would do.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

You're young. You're beautiful. You  
have more feelings than you know  
what to do with. Good. That's  
exactly the time to risk  
everything.

Beat.

GEMELLUS

Thank you, sir.

METROBIUS

Don't thank me, my boy. Go – and be  
who you are. Be wonderful.

Gemellus rises and kisses Metrobius on the forehead. Then he  
takes his leave: his chest a little higher, the weight a  
little lighter.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - GARDEN PORTICO - DAY**

A long table cluttered with scrolls, amphorae, fruit bowls  
and bits of costume. The troupe is assembled: Jo, Metrobius,  
Fabianus, Silvia, Castor, Pollux, Gemellus, Drollo, and  
Attalus/Glorian. Everyone is excited and chatty – the chaotic  
energy of a company about to make theatre.

JO

All right! Quiet! Let's assign roles before we all die of natural causes.

DROLIO

Call me when there's a joke with my name on it.

JO

There won't be. So – the part of Prometheus... goes to our guiding flame: Master Metrobius.

Applause and cheers. Metrobius bows graciously, but there's a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes.

METROBIUS

Don't applaud too loudly. The last time I played a chained Titan, I got a standing ovation – mostly from people leaving. But I accept.

JO

Silvia, you're our Sibyl. Fabianus – Jupiter. Drolio, you're the goat.

DROLIO

The goat?

JO

Yes. Literal. Also possibly symbolic. We'll figure it out.

FABIANUS

So many layers.

JO

Vibia, you're our Chorus, whose wise words will guide us through our tale.

Gemellus clears his throat. Jo sighs.

JO (CONT'D)

Ah yes: Gemellus, we're going to have you play... Mankind.

GEMELLUS

All of mankind?

CASTOR

We considered breaking it into three characters, but honestly, with those pecs...

POLLUX

And it's mostly walking and reacting. You're great at both.

GEMELLUS

You guys are the best!

JO

And finally – spear-carriers, nymphs, immortals... that's the rest of us. Including our set-builder-in-chief... Glorian. You'll make a fine god of background presence.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN

Happy to serve.

JO

As soon as we're back in Rome, we'll sort out the rest of the company for the big crowd scenes and the battles.

VIBIA

And pay them with what, exactly?

JO

Experience!

Laughter. WE linger briefly on Metrobius, staring at the sky, the flicker of doubt behind his eyes. Then on Castor and Pollux, exchanging a glance – they've got an idea forming.

POLLUX

(to Castor)

You thinking what I'm thinking?

Castor nods; worried.

**INT. VILLA METROBIUS - LIBRARY - DAY**

Scrolls are everywhere. Castor and Pollux are deep in discussion, sketching rough scenes. Jo watches, exhausted, parchment in hand.

JO

It's good... it's clever. But we're still asking a man of eighty to chain himself to a rock and shout at the sky.

CASTOR

That's what theatre is.

POLLUX

And politics. Marriage, religion...

JO  
 Metrobius is brilliant, of course.  
 But he's also tired.

CASTOR  
 So... we change it up.

POLLUX  
 Split the load. Metrobius becomes  
 Jupiter.

JO  
 Ooh! Like in "The God Father"?

CASTOR/POLLUX  
 Huh?

JO  
 Uh... nothing. You were saying?

CASTOR  
 We can write a great Jupiter. And  
 boy, will he be able to play it.

JO  
 What about Prometheus? Surely...  
 not Gemellus? I mean, he's sweet  
 and everything... but, you know...

POLLUX  
 Gods no; can you imagine?

They all chuckle.

CASTOR  
 So: Prometheus. He's younger.  
 Stronger. Fewer lines. Bigger  
 presence.

POLLUX  
 A symbol.

CASTOR  
 A big symbol.

JO  
 Who did you have in mind?

They turn slowly to the window. Outside, a shirtless  
 Attalus/Glorian is hoisting a wagon wheel with one hand and  
 laughing with Gemellus, who is bouncing like a gleeful puppy.

JO (CONT'D)  
 Really?

CASTOR  
 Come on - the crowd is gonna love  
 him!

POLLUX

He doesn't even need to act. He just needs to be.

CASTOR

Besides, who else could believably steal fire from the gods?

POLLUX

And look good doing it?

JO

You really think Metrobius will give up the lead?

CASTOR

If we ask him? No.

POLLUX

But...

Jo looks nervous. Very nervous.

**INT. VILLA METROBIUS - STUDY - DAY**

Metrobius reclines, robe artfully draped, reading one of his own reviews. Jo knocks, enters.

JO

Got a moment, sir?

METROBIUS

Only if it's about my performance, and contains laudatory adjectives in abundance.

JO

It is about your part.

Metrobius looks up.

JO (CONT'D)

I'm not saying you can't play Prometheus. No one can play him like you can.

METROBIUS

But?

JO

But maybe... maybe the role's too big for one man now? Too symbolic. Maybe it's stronger if Prometheus is muscle and fire – and you're the mind? The conscience. Jupiter (beat) "The God Father".

METROBIUS

The what?

JO

Seriously? I give up.

Metrobius sips his wine. He picks up a small cameo brooch and examines it. Holds it up to Jo. Puts it down

METROBIUS

Hmm. What would one call a small part like that, do you think?

JO

(looks meaningfully at the cameo)

A guest spot? Anyway, you're Jupiter: the most powerful god in all Olympus. The guiding light.

A long pause.

METROBIUS

You know, Jo – when I was twenty, I would've thrown you through that window for what you've just said. When I was forty, I would've stolen your idea and called it mine. But now?

He smiles.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

Now I want to see what happens next.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - COURTYARD - DAY**

The troupe has gathered. Castor and Pollux are animated, flapping scrolls and waving arms. Jo, mid-lecture, paces with a cracked stylus behind one ear.

Vibia leans in a column's shadow, watching. Jugurtha is nearby, chewing on a fig and observing silently. Attalus/Glorian sits cross-legged on the ground, repairing a dented helmet, unaware he's the topic of discussion.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN

What? Did I forget to boil the sandals again?

JO

Come here, big guy.

Attalus/Glorian stands, warily, and approaches the creative team.

JO (CONT'D)  
 (looking him over)  
 I always forget how much of you  
 there is. Glorian: how do you feel  
 about... fire?

ATTALUS/GLORIAN  
 Are you set on it?

POLLUX  
 Well, you might be. Oh, um, no...  
 it's a metaphor.

CASTOR  
 Mostly.

JO  
 Shh! We want you to play  
 Prometheus.

Long pause. Attalus/Glorian blinks.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN  
 The lead?

JO  
 You got presence. Gravitas.  
 Triceps. Plus you're the only one  
 who won't break a hip if you fall  
 off the stage.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN  
 But I was just meant to be a  
 corpse... I mean: an extra. A spear-  
 carrier.

VIBIA  
 Maybe it's time you stopped hiding  
 behind weapons.

Attalus/Glorian looks at her – a moment between them.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN  
 You're serious?

CASTOR  
 As serious as a censor at a nude  
 mime festival.

POLLUX  
 Which we were. In Alexandria. Long  
 story.

JO  
 We believe in you, big guy. All in  
 favour?

All hands go up – even Vibia's, though hers is a beat late.

Jo, Castor and Pollux head back to work at their desk.

Attalus/Glorian exhales. Long pause.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN  
Prometheus. Me. What could go  
wrong?

VIBIA  
Well, big guy, you've nailed one  
dramatic cliché...

Attalus/Glorian looks at her, confused.

VIBIA (CONT'D)  
(patting him on the arm)  
Famous last words.

**EXT. VILLA METROBIUS - COURTYARD - DAY**

Organised chaos.

Castor and Pollux are arguing about the scrolls. Jo is shouting about props. Fabianus helps lift a crate onto a creaky ox-cart while Drolio insists it contains sacred masks (it doesn't - it's wine).

Gemellus struggles to control a goat someone has inexplicably packed. Attalus/Glorian lifts bags like they weigh nothing. Vibia kisses Silvia on the cheek before climbing aboard.

A pot clatters. Someone yells. The cart lurches forward then abruptly halts.

Through the din, WE pull back to reveal Galla with Metrobius.

GALLA  
Master, you could fund the entire  
production with a snap of your  
fingers.

METROBIUS  
Of course I could.

GALLA  
So why don't you?

He watches the gang attempt to reverse the ox-cart which has now wedged itself against a fountain.

METROBIUS  
Where's the fun in that?

He smiles - a private, naughty, wonderful smile. Galla sighs and hands him his travel parasol.

GALLA

You're incorrigible, master.

METROBIUS

That's showbiz.

The friendly ox sneezes in Gemellus' face.

Off they go – jolting, yelling, laughing.

**EXT. ROAD TO ROME - DUSK**

The last light falls over the hills. The troupe dozes in the back of the rickety cart. Vibia leans on Jo's shoulder. Castor and Pollux mumble edits in their sleep.

Gemellus and Attalus/Glorian walk alongside, leading the way. The road is dusty, quiet. They walk for a moment in companionable silence.

GEMELLUS

You know, when I was a kid, my dad took me to the arena. Said I had to see what real strength looked like. Said it would make a man out of me.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN

And did it?

GEMELLUS

Not exactly. Although the tour of the gladiator baths was... wow.

(beat)

Anyway, there was this one fighter. No one ever saw his face – just a helmet and the strength of a legion. They called him The Mighty. But the other fighters – my dad told me – they called him The Merciful.

Attalus/Glorian slows slightly. Gemellus keeps walking.

GEMELLUS (CONT'D)

He didn't draw things out. Didn't showboat. Just... made it quick. Clean. Almost gentle.

(beat)

The crowd didn't like it – well, some of them anyway. But I did. I couldn't stop thinking about it, about him. That strength could be... kind. That you could still win without being cruel.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN

I'm sure that's not how most people  
saw it.

GEMELLUS

Oh, for sure.

(smiles, small and real)

But I did. I've carried it with me,  
ever since. Not because I wanted to  
be him. But because the little kid  
I was loved him. (beat) Attalus -  
that was his name.

He looks over at Attalus/Glorian; eyes open and vulnerable.

GEMELLUS (CONT'D)

Some people wait their whole lives  
hoping to be loved. I think... it's  
braver to just love someone. No  
promise. No reward. Just...  
because.

He exhales. Beat. Attalus is aware of what is happening  
beneath the words - and he chooses his carefully.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN

You know the story of Achilles and  
Patroclus?

GEMELLUS

Duh!

ATTALUS/GLORIAN

Everyone thinks Achilles was the  
brave one. But I think Patroclus  
was braver. He fought knowing he  
wouldn't win. For love. He just  
loved someone. I like that.

GEMELLUS

Me too.

Gemellus nods slowly. They walk on. Shoulder to shoulder. No  
words.

**INT. COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA - DAY**

It's quiet. Jo, Vibia, Attalus/Glorian, Castor, Pollux,  
Gemellus, and Fabianus slumped around a table. Silvia is  
curled up on a bench with a damp cloth on her head, snoring  
gently.

Half-eaten olives. One cup of wine being passed around like  
communion.

POLLUX

If I sell the sandals off my feet,  
I can afford to eat for two more  
days.

CASTOR

If you sell those particular  
sandals, we can all afford to  
breathe again.

GEMELLUS

I was offered a job. Apparently  
there's a market for after-dinner  
wrestling.

Pause – the others freeze mid-sip, mid-bite, mid-breath.

POLLUX

After-dinner what?

GEMELLUS

Wrestling. You oil up and grapple  
while people eat grapes and clap.  
The guy said I'd be a natural. Or  
"au naturel" – he was from Gaul.  
Wasn't that nice?

JO

Uh-huh, "nice".

VIBIA

I could go back to tavern work.  
Riccius always said I have a talent  
for mopping up other people's  
mistakes.

FABIANUS

I was approached about playing  
statues. Apparently, I have the  
necessary range.

JO

We've got a star, we've got a  
script. On the downside: no stage,  
no coin, no patron. Donatus? He's  
"spending quality time" with his  
brother Fredo out on the lake.  
Other than that, it's going great.

ATTALUS/GLORIAN

I could take labouring jobs again.  
The arena pays well for clean-up.

Everyone winces.

JO

No. No blood money. We're not that  
desperate.

POLLUX  
Give it a few days.

CASTOR  
I'm no defeatist, but I say we  
quit. Go back where we came from  
and pretend we dreamt it after too  
much cheap wine.

A silence. All eyes drift to Silvia. She snorts in her sleep,  
then sighs and rolls over.

Suddenly, the doors burst open and Drolio barrels in,  
gasping, dripping with sweat.

DROLIO (O.S.)  
(panting)  
BIG! FAME! PRIZE! A... show!  
Contest! Auditions! Today!

Everyone jumps to their feet – overlapping questions.

JO  
What kind of show!?

DROLIO  
"Rome's Got Talent". Judges! A  
crowd! The prize is... meh.

JO  
How long do we have?

DROLIO  
(getting his breath back)  
Less than the cycle of a very small  
sundial.

JO  
Come on – we'll make the act up as  
we go!

He herds the group toward the door. Vibia grabs scrolls.  
Silvia grabs her wine flask.

GEMELLUS  
I'll run ahead. See if I can stall  
them.

Jo nods. Gemellus sprints off like a gazelle. Jo turns to the  
others.

JO  
That gives us precisely... no time  
at all. Brilliant.

**EXT. STREETS OF ROME - MONTAGE**

The group weave through narrow alleys, bumping into market stalls and shouting "Sorry!"

Jo tries to dictate lines as Pollux scribbles while running.

Vibia trips, spills the scrolls.

A dog steals a prop. A child throws fruit.

**EXT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - ENTRANCE - DAY**

A grand crowd jostles. A BANNER reads: "ROME'S GOT TALENT - AUDITIONS TODAY!"

Gemellus arrives, flushed and sweaty. The officious REGISTRAR checks a wax tablet.

REGISTRAR

Name?

GEMELLUS

Gemellus Donatus Corleonis.

REGISTRAR

Act?

GEMELLUS

My troupe's on their way. We're actors... they'll be -

REGISTRAR

Actors? Ugh. Anyway, You're not on the scroll. So, unless you tame lions, juggle or sing; move along, pretty boy.

A long pause.

GEMELLUS

I... I sing a little.

The registrar waves him through.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - STAGE - DAY**

Gemellus stands alone on stage. The JUDGES lounge on high-backed seats.

JUDGE 1

You're cute. Impress me.

Gemellus takes a deep breath. He looks at the three musicians, who shrug. He hesitates.

Then – from deep within:

GEMELLUS

(singing)

*He walks like he's alone,  
Like no one understands.  
But I would walk beside him  
If he'd only take my hand.  
He hides behind the armour,  
Behind the mask, the game...  
But I see something shining  
That he won't dare to name.  
He speaks like no one's listening,  
He laughs like it's a shield.  
But still I see the quiet soul  
He's working to conceal.  
He doesn't know he's noble,  
He doesn't know he's kind...  
But I have seen that glory  
When he leaves the past behind.  
He's everything to me –  
The reason I stand tall.  
He's every dream I carry  
When the world feels small.  
He's everything to me,  
Even if he'll never see.  
He may not love me –  
But he's the reason  
I believe in me.  
I don't need a promise.  
I don't need a vow.  
Just to know I saw the best of him  
Is enough for now.  
Some loves are meant to lift us –  
To show us how to be...  
And even from the shadows,  
He's lit the light in me.  
He's everything to me –  
And I won't walk away.  
He's the fire that keeps me moving  
Through the hardest day.  
He's everything to me,  
Though he may never know –  
Some loves aren't meant  
To hold you back,  
They're meant to let you grow.  
So if he walks his path alone,  
And never turns to see...  
I'll still be stronger,  
Braver, whole –  
Because he's everything  
To me.*

As Gemellus sings, the audition band joins in once they hear the melody. Nervous at first, then Gemellus lights up: sure, strong, full of grace and passion. The other waiting acts hush. The hall stills.

Midway through, the doors at the back creak open.

The rest of the troupe enter quietly – out of breath, dusty, stunned. Jo slows to a halt. Vibia grips Jo's arm.

JO

He's... incredible.

Attalus/Glorian is frozen, staring. His face betrays something unexpected – real emotion.

Gemellus finishes the final note – voice trembling but proud.

A beat of silence. Then: heartfelt applause.

Gemellus turns – and sees them. His eyes lock on Attalus/Glorian.

He flushes, sheepish, overwhelmed.

Attalus/Glorian doesn't speak. But in his eyes: wonder.

The gang crowds in to congratulate Gemellus. The registrar approaches.

REGISTRAR

And what have we here?

GEMELLUS

My friends, my troupe. I said they'd be here.

REGISTRAR

You auditioned as a singer, kid, and we can't have a group of... "actors" cluttering up the stage. This is a respectable contest, you know.

From the wings – unseen – emerges Thrasea. He has been watching. He approaches and clears his throat.

THRASEA

I'll vouch for them, Polydices. I think the Emperor would enjoy some fellow thespians on stage – to keep him company.

REGISTRAR

Oh, Senator Thrasea. Your magnificence. Of course. The Divine Emperor, yes. Well, most assuredly, sir. Oh, yes indeed.

Thrasea looks directly into Gemellus' startled eyes.

THRASEA

(gently)

I very much enjoyed your song.

Gemellus opens his mouth like a codfish, but finds he cannot speak.

Jo and Vibia approach Gemellus.

JO

That was... incredible. You were incredible. Music and acting at the same time. I mean: I don't even know what you'd call that!

GEMELLUS

"Musical theatre"?

Beat.

JO

That's the stupidest thing I ever heard.

VIBIA

Seriously? I mean: grow up, Gemellus.

GEMELLUS

Sorry, guys.

JO

(withering)

"Musical theatre"? (to Vibia) I mean: what even..?

VIBIA

Unbelievable.

**INT. COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA - BACK ROOM - DAY**

A dusty table, mismatched chairs, one grim scroll of figures. The troupe is sweaty, broke, and increasingly desperate.

JO

(counting coins)

We're short. Way short. The entry fee alone's a full purse - plus sets, costumes, bribes, the sacrificial goat.

DROLIO

Do we really need the goat?

JO

Drolio! We're not savages. This isn't Persia.

Beat.

VIBIA

We've bled, begged, bartered... and  
now we can't even rent a second-  
hand toga.

Silence.

In the corner, Silvia stirs from her doze. She rises,  
clutching something to her chest.

SILVIA

Even for actors, you lot talk too  
much.

She crosses to Jo, holding out a necklace – gold-flecked,  
old, elegant.

SILVIA (CONT'D)

This was given to me long ago by...  
by someone I think I cared for. He  
said it was real. Told me to keep  
it close. I don't remember his  
face, but I do remember how I felt  
when he put it round my neck.

She presses it into Jo's hand.

JO

Silvia, we can't –

SILVIA

Pfft. What use is it to me, just  
dangling there? And I want to  
appear in something wonderful while  
I still can. Besides, if I ever  
remember who gave it to me, I'll  
demand it back.

FABIANUS

"Wonderful" it is, then.

DROLIO

We really doing this, kid?

Jo meets his eye. No hesitation.

JO

We've got enough for the entry fee.  
The rest – we make do. Costumes,  
sets, props – on a budget.

POLLUX

Even if it kills us?

JO

Especially if it kills us.

Beat.

JO (CONT'D)  
 Let's give them the greatest show  
 Rome's ever seen. This is gonna be  
 great!

They all lean in. The necklace glints in Jo's hand.

**INT. LOCAL SUBURAN STABLE - DAY**

CLOSE UP: JO

JO  
 This is a disaster!

A painted backdrop buckles and droops mid-scene. A drunk  
 EXTRA staggers through a cardboard temple.

An URCHIN gladiator – in an ill-fitting costume – drops his  
 wooden sword and chases a live chicken. Feathers explode into  
 the air. Drolio dangles from a too-short rope, gently swaying  
 and sipping from a flask.

JO (CONT'D)  
 Castor – where's the flaming  
 cauldron?

CASTOR  
 Pollux lit it, but –

Pollux sprints past, cloak aflame. Fabianus chases with a  
 bucket.

Gemellus, in the shadows, beams like it's the finest  
 production in all Rome.

JO  
 And... we'll take it from the top.  
 (beat) Again.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

The set has collapsed. The cast are sprawled in defeat.

Gemellus bounces over.

GEMELLUS  
 That was incredible, right?

JO  
 Well, I can't believe it, if that's  
 what you meant.

GEMELLUS

Good – because I may have invited  
someone...

He points to the loft.

A hush. The company turns as one. From shadow, Gaius Donatus  
steps forward. Regal. Imposing. Furious.

JO

Aw, Hecuba.

FABIANUS

Gods preserve us.

SILVIA

Shit.

DROLIO

I said: don't let Gemellus handle  
PR.

GAIUS DONATUS

What? Was? That?

GEMELLUS

Did you like it, pops?

GAIUS DONATUS

Like it? I barely survived it. That  
wasn't theatre, it was a hostage  
situation with props.

Jo bristles.

JO

Sir, with respect –

GAIUS DONATUS

Respect would've been not inviting  
me to this goat-scented  
catastrophe. Gemellus, you called  
them visionaries. I saw a circus –  
without the lions, without the  
dancing girls, and with all the  
crap I hate. Only thing coulda made  
it worse woulda been a mime!

JO

(sotto voce)

I hate mime.

Gemellus's grin dies. All is lost.

Then Attalus/Glorian enters – dusty, shirtless, dragging a  
pillar.

GAIUS DONATUS

By the gods! I'd know that chest  
anywhere.

He scrambles down from the loft.

GAIUS DONATUS (CONT'D)

Attalus the Great! Oh boy, oh boy!  
I'm your biggest fan. Seriously! I  
have a mosaic of you in my dining  
room!

The troupe freezes.

GAIUS DONATUS (CONT'D)

You've been hiding the world's  
greatest gladiator? That's your  
star. You want gold, kid? You got  
it. Put him on stage and Romans  
will flock like geese.

He claps Attalus's shoulder, snaps his fingers. Flunkeys  
appear.

GAIUS DONATUS (CONT'D)

My office. Tomorrow. Bring the big  
man. Oh, and Gemellus - Uncle  
Fredo's taking a long vacation.  
Very long.

Gemellus looks worried.

All eyes swing to Attalus.

JO

(hurt)

You could've told me... "Glorian."  
That's a ridiculous name, by the  
way.

ATTALUS

You wanted an actor, not a sword-  
swinger.

The others cheer this stroke of luck. Only Gemellus hangs  
back, conflicted.

VIBIA

(quiet)

We're not out of the woods, are we,  
Jo?

JO

Even with the Don's gold and the  
mighty Attalus, we can't pull this  
together in two days.

From the shadows:

METROBIUS

Then stop chasing spectacle. Tell  
the story.

JO

But we had gods, fire, a chariot...  
goats!

METROBIUS

Pah! Decoration. The story's  
underneath. A soul who gives  
humanity its greatest gift... and  
pays the ultimate price.

VIBIA

Prometheus. He gave us a miracle.

METROBIUS

Truth. Sacrifice. Hope. You don't  
need flying scenery for that – just  
courage. And trust.

JO

And an audience who believes.

METROBIUS

Exactly. Let's remind them why they  
fell in love with the theatre in  
the first place.

Jo looks over at the troupe – Gemellus tangled in rope,  
Drolio performing for the friendly ox, the twins arguing over  
scrolls.

JO

They're not ready.

METROBIUS

None of us ever are.

He claps Jo's shoulder and strides away.

JO

(admiringly)

Still knows how to make an exit.

He turns to the twins.

JO (CONT'D)

Fellas – hope you've got plenty of  
papyrus.

They glance at each other, baffled.

**INT. SUBURAN STABLE - NIGHT**

Castor and Pollux sit slumped among parchment and stubs of candles, the picture of exhausted hacks.

CASTOR

Boy, tonight really sucked. They don't get it, do they, bro?

POLLUX

Actors.

CASTOR

Actors!

POLLUX

They get everything: the spotlight, the applause, the songs -

CASTOR

And what do we get?

POLLUX

Inky fingers, my man.

CASTOR

And each other.

They share a weary grin - a brotherly beat.

POLLUX

Still feels like we're missing out.

CASTOR

Then maybe it's our turn.

POLLUX

Aw, yeah.

CASTOR

(singing, mimicking actors)

*The costume is pinching, it's stitched far too tight,  
The powder turns rosy instead of pure white,  
The sandals don't fit and the wig's come unglued -*

POLLUX

(singing)

*It's proof that the fates have a triumph imbued!*

CASTOR

(singing)

*When a cue is forgotten, the chorus off-key,*

(MORE)

CASTOR (CONT'D)

*When a goblet is missing for act  
number three,  
When the spotlight goes dark and  
they shuffle below -*

POLLUX

*(singing, same)  
The omens are golden, it's on with  
the show!*

CASTOR/POLLUX

*(singing, in unison)  
The worse the rehearsal, the better  
the show!  
The blunders today mean success  
tomorrow.  
Each stumble tonight is an omen we  
know:  
The worse the rehearsal, the better  
the show!*

POLLUX

*When the donkey lies down and  
refuses to bray,  
When the playwright is booed and  
they chase him away,  
When the tenor collapses and can't  
hit his note -  
It's certain the gods just gave us  
their vote!*

CASTOR

*If the curtains catch fire -  
It's applause they inspire!  
If the scenery falls -  
They'll be thrilled in the stalls!  
And if riots should start, then  
Fortuna decrees,  
They'll queue twice as long for a  
ticket to please!*

POLLUX

*The worse the rehearsal, the better  
the show!*

CASTOR

*A maxim as old as the Greeks, don't  
you know?*

POLLUX

*The more it collapses, the brighter  
we'll glow -*

CASTOR/POLLUX

*(in unison)  
The worse the rehearsal, the better  
the show!*

(MORE)

CASTOR/POLLUX (CONT'D)

*Let the roof tumble down, let  
rafters ignite!  
The gods of the theatre will cheer  
us tonight!  
Though chaos consumes us, tomorrow  
they'll know...  
The worse the rehearsal -  
The better the show!*

**INT. COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA - NIGHT**

Metrobius is seated at the table, nursing a cup of wine; exhausted, but understanding that he's missed this life.

Drolio enters uncertainly - unsure of how to say what he wants to say.

METROBIUS

You're not usually this quiet. Did someone die?

DROLIO

Just my dignity. And that went years ago.

METROBIUS

So what's troubling the clown?

Beat.

DROLIO

You won't remember... when I was a kid, my mother took me to see "The Siege of Corinth"... in Corinth, ironically. You were the star. You died for love - very loudly.

METROBIUS

I always did enjoy a good death. Especially on marble steps.

DROLIO

After the show, there was a crowd by the stage door. Somehow, I got to the front. You bent down... and you shook my hand. You said, "Keep your heart open. That's where the stories live."

METROBIUS

I said that?

DROLIO

Yes. And I... I never forgot it. I thought - "That's it. That's what I want. Telling stories." But then...  
(MORE)

DROLIO (CONT'D)

well, turns out the stage doesn't  
always love you back.

METROBIUS

You never mentioned this.

DROLIO

Because what if I wasn't worthy of  
the moment? What if you forgot?

METROBIUS

I forgot a lot of things, Drolio.  
Roles, lines, lovers, cities. And I  
had almost forgotten why I started.  
You've reminded me. Like you, I  
didn't choose the stage. She found  
me. Like a stray dog. She fed me,  
nurtured me, and never let me go.

(beat)

People think the stage is about  
applause? It's not. It's about us  
and our silly little lives. All of  
us. Together in one space. One  
breath. One moment. Together.

DROLIO

Even when they throw fruit?

METROBIUS

Especially then. I mean: free  
fruit.

Beat.

DROLIO

What if I mess up tomorrow?

METROBIUS

You will. You'll mess up something.  
We all do. But if you believe,  
Drolio: truly believe in the story  
we tell: if... if your heart is  
open – they'll feel it out there in  
the dark.

Metrobius stands, touches Drolio's shoulder.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

Break a leg, old friend.

DROLIO

I'll try not to break anything  
else!

They share a smile. Drolio watches Metrobius walk away – the  
man, the legend. Then looks down at his own hand, as if still  
feeling that long-ago handshake.

DROLIO (CONT'D)  
 (to himself, softly)  
 An open heart...

**EXT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - DAY**

The (fake) marble gleams. The banners flutter. The Theatre of Dionysus stands proudly ridiculous – a vast, decadent monument to Nero's ego.

A quiet awe settles over the gang as they arrive at the rear entrance to the Theatre. The city hums behind them, but ahead lies something sacred – a colossus of arches, tiers, and columns.

Already present are other finalists: all polish and gleam. A boyband - THE AQUA-DUCTS - wearing revealing chitons - are being fussed over by an army of bustling STYLISTS and GROUPIES.

The troupe all look dismayed. Each face is etched with worry.

DROLIO  
 Is it too late to quit?

FABIANUS  
 Nonsense. (to Silvia, gently)  
 Darling, we're home.

VIBIA  
 (indicating the other  
 performers)  
 Look at them... not a bum act here.

JO  
 (squaring his shoulders)  
 Then they'll raise the bar. Good.

THRASEA (O.S.)  
 Spoken like a man who hasn't yet  
 fallen off it.

They turn to see Thrasea standing in the shade of a colonnade. He's gorgeous in his senatorial robes, but something in his eyes is warmer than expected.

THRASEA (CONT'D)  
 Welcome to the theatre. I hope  
 you've brought your best. The stage  
 is like a sacrificial bull; it  
 knows when you're bluffing.

He starts walking them inside. They follow, hushed.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - BACKSTAGE - DAY**

The group enters from the wings. The full arena spreads before them: golden light on new stone; a breeze through the proscenium. Empty seats shimmer with anticipation.

SILVIA

Gods, I've missed this.

THRASEA

I never got the chance. To be up there.

(beat)

But I used to sneak in. When I was supposed to be at my books. My tutor said I'd end up penniless in a mask. I said: "Better a mask than a tomb."

JO

Pretentious little guy, weren't ya? But you love it. The theatre.

THRASEA

The Forum lets men talk. But the stage? The stage lets them feel.

A beat. Jo is moved.

JO

You shoulda been a playwright.

THRASEA

I am. In secret. A terrible one, I might add. I'm still holding out for a decent director.

The group laughs – a little nervously, but with growing confidence. The theatre swallows their echoes.

The group slowly fanning out to explore the stage, soaking in the faux grandeur. Behind them, Thrasea lingers, watching the theatre work its quiet magic.

Thrasea leads Jo, Vibia, Drollo, Metrobius, and Gemellus through an archway – now giving his impresario spiel.

THRASEA (CONT'D)

Built in record time. They say Rome has never constructed something so large with so little scaffolding – moral or otherwise.

DROLIO

How'd Nero pay for this?

THRASEA

Stopped aqueduct maintenance for a few weeks.

VIBIA

Who needs water when you've got theatre, am I right?

They step through the main entrance into the vast bowl of the theatre.

The others move ahead. Gemellus lingers, eyes tracing the arc of the stage, the soaring walls, the painted skybox.

Thrasea glances back and notices. Watches Gemellus a moment longer than necessary.

THRASEA

You've an eye for beauty.

GEMELLUS

I mean – wow – when it's right there in front of you, it's... it's really hard...

THRASEA

(wryly)

I can see that.

Gemellus blinks. A pause.

THRASEA (CONT'D)

That's an observation, by the way, not a proposition.

GEMELLUS

(hopeful)

And... if it were a proposition?

They both let the question hang – not flirtation exactly, but something charged.

THRASEA

Then I'd say: bide your time, young actor. You'll need every ounce of strength for what's to come.

A beat – they hold each other's gaze just a second longer than either planned. Then:

THRASEA (CONT'D)

(gently)

Break a leg.

GEMELLUS

Oh, I hope not. I mean, I have a lot of running to do in the... (realising) Oh, yeah... thanks.

Thrasea smiles indulgently as he leaves to rejoin the others. Gemellus watches him go, not quite smiling yet – but the stirrings of something more than nerves.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - BACKSTAGE - DAY**

Thrasea catches up to Vibia, who is standing quietly. She looks nervous at the vast expanse of seats.

THRASEA  
You don't like crowds?

VIBIA  
Only when they're buying drinks.

THRASEA  
Then you're in the right place.

A beat. She recognises him.

VIBIA  
You're Senator Thrasea. I thought you'd be older. Or carved out of marble.

THRASEA  
Ah, my reputation precedes me.

VIBIA  
It does... You're not like the others.

THRASEA  
I'm trying not to be. Rome has too many men pretending to lead. I'd rather serve.

A pause. Vibia looks away.

VIBIA  
Serve who? The people? Nero? Rome? (beat) I used to believe in Rome. Then I saw what it does to people like me.

THRASEA  
And yet, here you are. Stepping into the light.

VIBIA  
I didn't step. I got pushed. Maybe that's what a miracle is.

Thrasea notices her tattoo – the small, discreet cross on her wrist.

THRASEA

Second chances?

VIBIA

You know what it means?

THRASEA

I do. There are many paths to truth, Vibia. The stage is truth, even though it's make-believe. Rome forgets that... But people remember. Mostly... (smiling) eventually. Life is fleeting, but Art...

He begins to leave, then turns back.

THRASEA (CONT'D)

When the time comes... if it comes...

(gesturing at the empty auditorium)

Speak for us. For all of us.

VIBIA

What if they won't listen?

Beat.

THRASEA

They will.

**INT. COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA - BEDROOM - NIGHT**

A riot of discarded costumes, incense smoke, and half-eaten figs. Metrobius sits at his vanity, peeling off his eye makeup with slow precision.

A tentative knock. The door creaks open.

ATTALUS

I can come back -

METROBIUS

Darling, if you're going to filch my part, you may as well enter with confidence. Come.

Attalus enters; awkward. Metrobius catches his reflection in the mirror - then deliberately turns to face him.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

You were good today.

ATTALUS

It wasn't my intention.

METROBIUS

Intention has nothing to do with  
it. It's a gift.

A long pause. Metrobius reaches for the headdress of Prometheus – half laurel, half shackle. He holds it up like a crown.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

You know – I've played gods,  
emperors, even a talking dolphin...  
in "Neptune's Revenge" – very  
modern. But never a chained man  
with fire in his belly.

(smiles faintly)

Perhaps because I lost the fire  
years ago.

He stands, offers the headdress to Attalus.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

You have the fury. By Jupiter, you  
have the shoulders.

Attalus takes the headdress, stunned by the gesture.

ATTALUS

I don't know what to say.

METROBIUS

Then say nothing.

A beat. Metrobius lays a hand on his cheek, gentle and theatrical.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

Courage is not the sole province of  
the arena, my boy. Remember that.

He turns, sweeping out of the room in a flurry of silks, leaving Attalus standing alone – headdress in hand; the future on his shoulders.

**EXT. COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA - COURTYARD - NIGHT**

The air hums with nervous excitement. Props half-finished. Costumes hung on pegs.

Jo sits alone on a low stool, going over a prop list. His notes are obsessively scribbled. His gaze flickers back and forth between his papers and Attalus and Vibia, who are sitting on a bench and talking.

Silvia enters quietly, holding a goblet and a shawl. She watches him for a moment before speaking.

SILVIA

If you stare at that list any harder, it might burst into flames.

JO

Wouldn't be the first thing that's caught fire this week.

Silvia chuckles and hands him the goblet.

SILVIA

It's good for calming the nerves. You'll feel better, or at least forget you cared.

JO

Thanks.

They sit in silence for a beat. Silvia looks out at the moonlit night.

SILVIA

It's nearly time, isn't it? (deep breath) The lights. The thunderous applause.

JO

Or thunderous silence.

SILVIA

Oh hush. This show has heart. It has truth. It has me in it – what more do they want?

Jo laughs despite himself. Then a pause. His smile fades into something softer.

JO

Silvia... can I ask you something ridiculous?

SILVIA

Darling, I once performed Medea with hand puppets. There is no such thing as ridiculous in this business.

Jo leans back, looking up at the stars.

JO

Do you ever feel like everyone else found something you didn't? A person, I mean. A love that's glorious and scary and... kinda crazy?

Silvia sits beside him, suddenly quieter.

SILVIA

All love is crazy, my dear. Anyone who tells you otherwise is lying through his teeth.

JO

I used to think that would be my story. Me and someone, you know? A love story. (beat) But it's not, is it? Not that kind of love story, anyway.

Silvia looks back with sympathy.

JO (CONT'D)

But — when I'm watching you and Metrobius and — God help me — even Gemellus; when it works — when the audience laughs or cries because of something I helped create ... I feel it's not so different.

SILVIA

It's not different at all. It's love, my dear. What else do you call it?

He glances at her. She's serious. Thoughtful.

SILVIA (CONT'D)

You love this world, Jo-Jo, admit it. You love these mad, beautiful, infuriating people. You love making something from nothing and then giving it away like a feast. (beat) That's love, my dear. That's the very best kind of love — because it's not just for someone; it's for everyone.

JO

Even when they throw fruit?

SILVIA

Especially when they throw fruit. I mean: free fruit.

Jo laughs. Then softens again. He takes her hand, unexpectedly tender.

JO

I didn't think I'd be okay with it. But... I am. Because I still get to love and... be loved, I guess. That's enough.

Silvia pats his cheek with wrinkled fingers.

SILVIA

You old romantic. Trust me, Jo-Jo: you'll make 'em laugh and make 'em cry. Maybe even me, and I haven't cried since dear old Julie C. got it in the back. Such a poppet.

Jo wipes his eyes, overwhelmed with exhaustion and emotion.

JO

You think we're ready?

SILVIA

Of course we're not ready, you fool. But that's the theatre...  
(beat) And isn't it wonderful?

They look out together toward the stage. The lights beyond beckon like stars. Silvia leaves Jo to his thoughts.

JO

(singing)

*I've wandered the markets,  
I've worked on the corners,  
I've slept in the doorways  
When nights got too cold.  
I've chased every promise  
That faded by morning,  
And traded my laughter  
For coppers and gold.  
I've fought for a moment,  
A place I belonged in,  
A roof where the welcome  
Would never wear thin.  
But each time I found it,  
The lock was already  
Half-turning to tell me  
I couldn't come in.  
But then - there it was -  
Past the boards, past the bustle,  
A doorway that felt  
Like it opened for me.  
No questions, no judgement,  
Just stories and shadows,  
And faces as wondrous  
As wondrous could be.  
For the love of the show,  
For the smell of the cedar,  
For the shadows that dance  
On the wall.  
For the love of the show,  
For the spell of the theatre,  
For escaping the noise and the  
brawl.  
I can be someone noble,  
Or foolish, or tragic,  
Or make the whole city  
(MORE)*

JO (CONT'D)

*Roar loud in delight.  
I can stand in the sunlight,  
Or whisper in darkness,  
And live fifty lives  
In the space of one night.  
I never had walls,  
Never had steady ground,  
Just the sound of the street,  
And the turn of the wheel.  
But here in this place,  
When the lights all go down,  
I feel something warm,  
I feel something real...  
I will stake all I'm given,  
I'll bet every dream  
On the life I've been livin'.  
Let the crowd rise and know -  
I've found where I'll stay,  
For the love of the show.  
I've been lost everywhere I could  
go...  
Until I found home -  
In the love of the show.*

**EXT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - DAY**

A sea of Roman citizens roars in anticipation. Silks flutter, trumpets blare, and acrobats tumble across the sand in dizzying formation.

A hand-written placard backstage being hung crookedly:  
"TONIGHT ONLY - ROME'S GOT TALENT - ALL NEW ACTS!"

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - IMPERIAL BOX - DAY**

A TRUMPET FANFARE. A hush falls. The imperial box glows with gold and excess.

Nero rises: resplendent in a jewel-encrusted toga and golden laurels.

NERO

Citizens of Rome! Proper ones and -  
the rest of you. Slaves. Women.  
That sort of thing.

(arms open, beaming)

Today, the Arts and the people meet  
as never before. We are not met for  
blood or battle - no - we are met  
to bathe in the glow of Art in  
triumph. "Rome's Got Talent" is not  
just a spectacle. It is a  
celebration of artistry... and  
modesty.

Stifled coughs from Thrasea behind him.

NERO (CONT'D)

And so – in a gesture of pure  
humility – so typical of me, by the  
way – I offer this!

He gestures magnanimously. A velvet pillow is brought forward  
by a GIGANTIC SLAVE: a scroll wrapped in gold ribbon.

NERO (CONT'D)

The Tessera Aurea. The Golden  
Ticket. To be awarded once, and  
once only... A guarantee that  
whoever holds it will be granted  
the chance to perform for you, my  
people. To share the stage this  
night with your beloved Emperor.

Shocked gasps; whispers ripple across the theatre.

NERO (CONT'D)

Yes – one of you: the scum of our  
beloved Rome, could join me here.  
Or even – dare I say it – one of  
our noble Senators.

His gaze sweeps the patrician section – lumpen, middle-aged,  
grey; smiles freeze.

NERO (CONT'D)

But probably not. Can you imagine?  
Anyway, such an exalted privilege  
must be entrusted to our wisest and  
best, but since I cannot accept it  
myself, I have selected...

He turns with mock solemnity to Thrasea.

NERO (CONT'D)

Publius Claudius Thrasea Paetus –  
my most loyal advisor and a man of  
unshakable morality. You, and only  
you, shall decide who is worthy.  
Not even I – your Emperor – may  
challenge your decision.

Beat.

NERO (CONT'D)

(sotto voce, to Thrasea)  
Not that I'll need to, of course.  
This ticket is for the spontaneous  
encore after I win. I've worked on  
it for weeks.

Nero winks.

THRASEA

I shall give it - and you - exactly  
what you deserve, mighty Caesar.

NERO

See that you do. And we need it  
back after; it's a rental.

Nero turns back to the crowd

NERO (CONT'D)

People of Rome. Here, in the golden  
light of Apollo, let "Nero's Got...

Thrasea coughs loudly.

NERO (CONT'D)

... "Rome's Got Talent"... begin!

The arena explodes with cheers, music crashes in, dancers  
flood the stage, and a ridiculous Roman-style theme tune  
blares out.

Thrasea, scroll now tucked carefully under his arm, looks  
down at the sand - a flicker of concern crossing his face.

**EXT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - BACKSTAGE - DAY**

The troupe is buzzing with last-minute preparations. Props  
are flying, lines are being recited, makeup is smeared on in  
haste. Jo, Metrobius, and Attalus are finalising a cue when a  
loud commotion interrupts.

A squad of PRAETORIAN GUARDS storm in, parting the crowd. At  
their centre is Riccius from the Palatine Grill: smug and  
self-satisfied.

RICCIUS

That's her! The girl from my  
tavern! A Christian! Right there on  
the street, bold as brass! I was  
walking my kid into the theatre and  
bam - Christianity! Right in front  
of his poor little eyes!

Gasps. Vibia stands still, proud, calm. She doesn't deny it.

VIBIA

And?

The crowd recoils as if she's just declared herself cursed.  
The guards surround her.

GUARD CAPTAIN

Christians are enemies of the  
state, pal; or hadn't you heard?  
You'll answer to the arena, toots.

JO

What?! She's an artist, not a threat!

GUARD CAPTAIN

I don't make the rules. And if you don't want to spend the night in the cells, you'll back off. Now.

RICCIUS

Look at her – poisoning the purity of Rome. This city was built on orgies and graft, lady, not turning the other cheek!

Then a voice – deep, calm, and cutting – breaks through.

JUGURTHA

This is Roman justice?

The soldiers falter. He steps forward.

JUGURTHA (CONT'D)

She didn't plot. She didn't riot. She didn't even raise her voice.

He gestures to the stage behind them.

JUGURTHA (CONT'D)

You celebrate stories here – gods, myths, legends, heroes. But you find one true thing in your temple of lies. And she terrifies you.

Jo moves to Jugurtha, placing a hand on his shoulder. No words. Just quiet respect.

JUGURTHA (CONT'D)

White people, am I right?

Jo nods.

The guards begin to shackle Vibia. Attalus lunges forward, stopped by Silvia and Metrobius.

METROBIUS

Not now, Attalus. We'll right this wrong. I swear it.

As she's led away, Vibia turns to Jo and the troupe:

VIBIA

Go. For us. For all those wonderful people out there in the dark.

ATTALUS

Vibia!

She gives him a last look, and then is gone.

POLLUX

Vibia was the Chorus. No Chorus, no show.

METROBIUS

(to Drolio)

You've been shadowing her. You know the part.

DROLIO

I'm the goat.

JO

So what? We lose the goat. You're the Chorus now.

HECKLER (O.S.)

No goat?! What are you guys: Persians?!

Metrobius draws himself up in all his dignity and glory - placing his hands on Drolio's shoulders. He stares majestically into the comic's eyes. Something mystical passes between them.

METROBIUS

This is your moment, old friend. All your life you've waited to be heard. Tonight, all Rome hears you. One who knows the rhythm of laughter and tears: two sides of the same battered coin.

Drolio is awestruck.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

Remember, all you need out there is truth. And you, Drolio - your heart is true.

Metrobius breaks into a soft smile.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

Go. Find your light... and remind them why theatre matters.

The troupe all gather around Drolio, whispering encouragement, giving strength.

Drolio's expression says it all: pride mixed with absolute terror.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - NIGHT**

CROWD: rowdy, roaring, dressed to impress.

TORCHES flicker along the rafters. Nero lounges in his gilded judge's box, sipping wine, flanked by Thrasea, several courtesans, and SLAVES.

**MONTAGE STARTS - MUSIC DRIVING, FAST-CUT STYLE**

The Fire-Eating Vestal Virgins. Six stunning "VESTAL VIRGINS" - in immaculate white robes - perform a pyrotechnic belly-dance, each devouring tongues of fire in perfect unison.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - JUDGES' DAIS - NIGHT**

JUDGE 1

Is it me, or did it just get hotter  
than Vesuvius in here? Am I right?

He fans himself with his programme scroll.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - STAGE - NIGHT**

Two hulking GLADIATORS in full armour create intricate rhythms using their shields, swords, and guttural grunts - the crowd goes wild.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - JUDGES' DAIS - NIGHT**

JUDGE 2

I came for bloodsport... but you  
guys hit the beat of my heart.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - STAGE - NIGHT**

The Aqua-Ducts. A boyband dressed as sexy engineers sings about hydraulic pressure - complete with synchronised water effects.

THE AQUA-DUCTS

(singing)

*Pressure makes the flow (ohhh)  
Feel it deep below (so deep)  
Every stone in line,  
Every curve designed,  
To let our love... overflow.  
Pressure makes the flow (ohhh)  
From the hills to Rome (to Rome)  
Girl, just let it stream,  
Like an endless dream -  
Hydraulic love will bring you home.*

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - JUDGES' DAIS - NIGHT**

JUDGE 3

I learned nothing about hydraulics... but I felt the pressure. And I loved it!

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT**

Jo and Gemellus huddle in darkness. They've seen the glitz. The spectacle. The abs.

GEMELLUS

They're just so... cool.

JO

They really are. Oh gods - everyone's so...

GEMELLUS

Ripped.

JO

Visual! This is gonna be a disaster.

GEMELLUS

We're gonna need a miracle.

JO

Uh-huh. (beat) Wait, a what?

GEMELLUS

A "miracle". I'll tell ya later.

JO

Aha - so you know what it means?

GEMELLUS

(smiling, beat)

No.

BACK TO STAGE -

The anticipation is rising in the audience. The star turn is about to perform.

EMCEE

Friends, Romans, countrymen. Are you not entertained?

The crowd roars its approval.

EMCEE (CONT'D)

Now we come to something very special. (beat) A humble shepherd boy.

CROWD

Awww.

EMCEE

Ahem. Yes. A humble shepherd boy  
 craves your indulgence to share his  
 simple song with you tonight.  
 Please welcome him to our stage.

Much applause. Nero enters, costumed as the world's most overdressed shepherd boy. He has a simpering expression on his face; believing for all the world that he has the audience fooled.

The applause drops precipitously.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - IMPERIAL BOX - NIGHT**

Thrasea puts his head in his hands.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - STAGE - NIGHT**

Nero takes centre stage - of course - accompanied by an orchestra.

NERO

(singing)

*All the world's a stage - they say,  
 But few know how to play.  
 They stumble through  
 Their little parts,  
 Then bow and fade away.  
 I know each block and cue.  
 I've memorised each line.  
 I know exactly what to do -  
 So fitting.  
 So divine.  
 From there you look at me -  
 The sun, the moon the spark.  
 I am your fantasy,  
 You people in the dark.  
 They beg me for spectacle,  
 Then blame me for the smoke.  
 They'll roast me like a villain -  
 But I wrote the final joke.  
 I'm standing  
 The villain, clown  
 And leading man,  
 For all the world's a stage  
 And I'll take each bright light  
 That I can!  
 The crowd can't look away,  
 There's nowhere they can turn.  
 Today and every day  
 The world is mine to burn.  
 I take their screams,  
 (MORE)*

NERO (CONT'D)

*Their smouldering dreams –  
And give them art from woe.  
I am the perfect pro.  
I don't spill blood – I stage it.  
I don't make war – I wage it.  
I am not cruel – I'm crucial.  
I am not mean – I'm meaning.  
I am Art!  
I wrote this on my own –  
Each glory, gasp, and groan.  
I cast the world,  
I lit the stars,  
I claimed the stage, alone.  
So out there in the stalls,  
If a poet falls,  
Or thunder shakes the floor –  
That's not a flaw, it's fanfare.  
And Rome's my set, my score.  
If I burn down the city?  
They'll rise and beg for more!  
Forgive me: I'm a giver,  
And for you I will deliver.  
For Rome I'll write a brand new  
page,  
For all the world's my stage!*

There is a smattering of applause.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - AUDITORIUM - NIGHT**

Centurions order their legionaries to remind the crowd that it's better to applaud than go to the lions.

Generous – though still modest – applause grows.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - STAGE - NIGHT**

EMCEE

And now, plebs and patricians,  
senators and slaves... we come to  
our final act. Last – and most  
definitely least: our evening's one  
– and thankfully only – moment  
of... theatre.

The crowd lets out a sigh of disappointment.

EMCEE (CONT'D)

Yes. Could've been worse, folks –  
could've been mime.

HECKLER (O.S.)

I love mime!

The Emcee exits the stage.

Jo's troupe stand together backstage - a ragtag band of misfits, wearing the weight of what they've built together.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - AUDITORIUM - NIGHT**

A hush. The crowd shifts restlessly. This isn't what they expected. This is not a grand spectacle with the glory of Rome; this is quiet, intimate, and strangely beautiful.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - STAGE - NIGHT**

Dim light. A shape emerges from the darkness. A man.

Drolio hobbles into view in ragged robes. His voice is now clear and rich - surprisingly commanding.

DROLIO (AS THE CHORUS)  
Hear now a tale not sung in  
temples, nor carved in stone nor  
sung in marble halls. A tale of  
fire. Stolen. Given. And the price  
we all must pay.

DROLIO (AS THE CHORUS) (CONT'D)  
They called him Prometheus. We  
called him fool. He called us men.

FLASH OF LIGHT. DRUMBEAT.

Silvia enters, draped in gauze. Her face given new life. Her eyes sharp as flint. Her every step triggers intricate lighting effects - stars blooming across the cyclorama.

Fabianus (as Vulcan) - glistening with soot and sweat - beats a massive hammer on an anvil in rhythm.

DROLIO (AS THE CHORUS) (CONT'D)  
When the gods were young and  
jealous, they hoarded fire like  
coin. One titan said - "Let sacred  
flame burn; not in Heaven, but on  
Earth."

Prometheus (Attalus) strides onstage. Helmeted, powerful, majestic. Defiant.

ATTALUS (AS PROMETHEUS)  
They crawl. They beg. They kneel to  
thunder and call it justice. I will  
not kneel.

Attalus removes his helmet and stands defiant - bathed in golden light and the adoration of the crowd.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - IMPERIAL BOX - NIGHT**

Nero lounges in his golden seat, half-listening, bored, twisting a fig stem between his fingers. He's about to turn away when something... shifts.

A gesture. A turn of phrase. The cadence of the voice.

NERO

Wait.

On stage, Attalus (as Prometheus) throws back his shoulders and roars – the posture unmistakable.

NERO (CONT'D)

No!

The fig stem snaps in his hand.

NERO (CONT'D)

That's not... no, no, no. That's not just some actor.

He looks to Thrasea, who stares ahead, saying nothing.

NERO (CONT'D)

That's Attalus. My gladiator. What's he doing up there? He'll die for this.

On stage, Attalus turns. A shaft of torchlight hits his face full-on.

The crowd gasps – not because of the recognition, but because of the power of the moment.

NERO (CONT'D)

He was supposed to kill, not... kill it.

Then a slow, agonising realisation:

NERO (CONT'D)

And he's good. (beat) Almost as good as me.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - STAGE - NIGHT**

Attalus (as Prometheus) thrusts a torch toward Gemellus, crouched centre stage, painted in pale clay. Naked save for a fig leaf, he rises – slowly, warily – Mankind in the making.

GEMELLUS (AS MANKIND)

What is this light? What is this... pain?

He flinches, then reaches for the flame.

GEMELLUS (AS MANKIND) (CONT'D)  
 What kind of gift would cost me  
 all?

Drolio steps forward again – now more sarcastic.

DROLIO (AS THE CHORUS)  
 (to audience)  
 Don't look at me. I said it was a  
 bad idea.

The audience laughs – clearly adoring Drolio's performance.

Then: THUNDER.

Metrobius (as Jupiter) appears atop a raised platform,  
 descending with his arms spread, crowned in gold.

METROBIUS (AS JUPITER)  
 You dare, Titan! You dare defy  
 Olympus?!

He descends, slowly, his voice like silk and storm. The crowd  
 immediately recognises the city's greatest actor. A buzz like  
 electricity runs through the audience.

CROWD  
 (various)  
 "It's him." "It's Metrobius." "I  
 thought he was dead." "He looks  
 good." Etc.

A wave passes through the audience. The kind of change in  
 atmosphere only the greatest actors can bring. With just the  
 tiniest acknowledgement to his reception, Metrobius  
 continues:

METROBIUS (AS JUPITER)  
 I gave you life. You gave them  
 questions.

ATTALUS (AS PROMETHEUS)  
 Which frightens you more than  
 swords.

Metrobius (as Jupiter) sweeps downstage, robes swirling.

METROBIUS (AS JUPITER)  
 They'll build empires – and forget  
 who gave them sky and sun. They'll  
 build temples, write poems, fall in  
 love – and blame me when they  
 suffer.

Silvia emerges once more as the Sibyl.

SILVIA (AS THE SIBYL)  
 All gifts come with chains. All  
 chains can be broken. The choice is  
 theirs.

Gemellus, now transformed. Vulnerable and honest.

GEMELLUS (AS MANKIND)  
 I do not want Olympus. I do not  
 want a throne. I want to love and  
 lose and try again. If that is  
 sin... then I will gladly burn.

Metrobius (as Jupiter) takes a long pause – the kind only  
 great actors dare.

METROBIUS (AS JUPITER)  
 Then burn! But remember, mortal,  
 who it was who lit the flame.

He turns, robe snapping, and ascends slowly to his golden  
 throne.

DROLIO (AS THE CHORUS)  
 And so the world began – not with  
 the gods' permission... but with  
 the choice of Man.

BLACKOUT.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - IMPERIAL BOX - NIGHT**

Eyebrows raise. Nero fumes.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT**

All is hustle as the players and their team scramble to get  
 everything ready for part two. They share nervous, excited  
 glances. Jo looks over to Metrobius – all his powers are at  
 work tonight.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - AUDITORIUM - NIGHT**

The crowd is difficult to read. They are certainly intrigued –  
 but are they entertained? The chatter amongst themselves.

Then: a crash of cymbals and the torches on stage are relit.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - STAGE - NIGHT**

Gemellus, in character as "Mankind," stands centre stage,  
 clothed as a simple farmer. He holds the flame not as a  
 weapon, but a symbol. His body language is no longer  
 tentative – he owns the space.

The crowd is riveted.

GEMELLUS (AS MANKIND)  
 You gave me life but chained my  
 thoughts. You built the sky, and  
 told me not to dream. You filled  
 the world with beauty – and said –  
 "Be grateful, but do not ask."

A pause – a breath. Then firm.

GEMELLUS (AS MANKIND) (CONT'D)  
 I will ask. I will wonder. I will  
 burn, if it means I burn free.

MURMURS from the crowd – shocked, stirred.

Metrobius (as Jupiter) steps down from his perch, robes  
 flowing, but the god seems... shaken.

METROBIUS (AS JUPITER)  
 You think yourselves ready for  
 freedom? You, who bicker and  
 blunder and break what you build?  
 What will you do with fire, when it  
 burns your home? With thought, when  
 it questions your gods? With power,  
 when it lures your sons?

Prometheus steps forward now – strong, calm.

ATTALUS (AS PROMETHEUS)  
 They'll fall. They'll rise. And  
 fall again. Better a ruined city of  
 stumbling men than a palace of  
 silenced children.

Silvia, as the Sibyl, returns to centre-stage. Her voice is  
 quiet – and prophetic.

SILVIA (AS THE SIBYL)  
 A flame cannot be unlit. A question  
 cannot be unasked. The age of gods  
 ends... when men begin to think for  
 themselves.

DROLIO (AS THE CHORUS)  
 (devastatingly effective  
 now)  
 And so the world began. Not by  
 decree – but by defiance. And an  
 ordinary Man.

BLACKOUT.

Silence. Then: Thunderous applause. The crowd is on its feet,  
 many of them not just cheering but shouting in agreement.

The poor in the upper tiers chant "Prometheus! Prometheus!" – others begin to yell "Freedom!" and "Truth!"

In the imperial box, Nero sits frozen. A vein in his neck pulses.

AIDES lean in, unsure whether to speak. Thrasea, impassive, watches him, then leaves the box: unobserved.

NERO

That wasn't a play; it was treason  
in verse. They'll pay for this. All  
of them.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - AUDITORIUM - NIGHT**

The crowd is still standing, thunderous.

Jo and his company bow, breathless and triumphant. Even Attalus is visibly moved. Metrobius bows like royalty.

Nero, flanked by his aides, rises in the imperial box. All rise with him and – flanked by Praetorian guards – descend to the stage. Jo and the troupe shuffle to the wings.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - STAGE - NIGHT**

As he reaches centre-stage, Nero raises a hand and the applause begins to die.

NERO

A worthy performance... I have  
notes, but... Anyway, silence now  
for the chief judge of our contest.  
The high priest of Rome: your own;  
your very own Pontifex Maximus!

The PONTIFEX MAXIMUS (70s) – a preening patrician with heavy eyeliner and a scroll longer than his arm – speaks:

PONTIFEX MAXIMUS

A powerful display, no doubt.  
Inspiring. Some might say:  
dangerous. But the judges have  
deliberated without fear or  
favour... and we name the winner of  
the Golden Laurel to be...

A beat – he smiles obsequiously.

PONTIFEX MAXIMUS (CONT'D)

...the Emperor Nero, for his... uh,  
breathtaking... uh, for that, um...  
For making such an incredible  
spectacle of himself.

Nero turns to what he sure will be a rapturous reception.

SILENCE.

Then: boos. Hissing.

Someone throws a sandal. Someone else yells "Fix!"

Jo and the company stand in the wings: stunned. Attalus clenches a fist. Drollo looks like he might throw up.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT**

Thrasea is speaking in a low voice to the Emcee. The Emcee is evidently not keen on what he's hearing - but Thrasea is the most powerful senator in Rome, so...

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - STAGE - NIGHT**

The Emcee steps forward.

EMCEE

And now, by decree of our luminous sovereign - the final performance!

NERO

Say what now?

EMCEE

A special addition to our programme; something none of us expected. I give you: Vibia the Christian, for what is absolutely, positively her last ever appearance... anywhere.

From the holding pen at stage left, Vibia - in chains - is led out by guards. A musclebound EXECUTIONER - masked and ominous - stands to one side. A hush falls. She stands exposed, eyes proud, chin high. This is no prisoner - this is a symbol.

Whispers ripple through the crowd. The moment is electric.

Nero thinks he knows what's happening.

NERO

The Christian girl? Oh Thrasea, you sly fox! This is wonderful! (to aides) I can't believe he kept it a secret. I mean: the rabble loves a good beheading - what better finale? Or do we have a spare lion backstage? Anyone? Lion? No? Shame.

At that moment, a quiet but steady figure steps forward:  
Thrasea. Holding a scroll.

He walks calmly to centre stage and turns towards Nero.

THRASEA

By the power vested in me – as  
tribune, senator and recipient of  
the divine Emperor's own boundless  
generosity –

He unrolls the the GOLDEN TICKET.

THRASEA (CONT'D)

I am empowered to add one act to  
the performance at my absolute  
discretion. No vote. No veto.  
(beat) Let it be... Vibia.

Gasps. The crowd erupts – a swell of support, scandal,  
defiance.

Nero jolts up, face reddening.

NERO

To be beheaded? (to Thrasea) Right?

THRASEA

You said yourself, sire – even a  
noble could share your stage.  
Tonight, you'll share it with  
someone nobler than us all.

NERO

But... she's a Christian!

THRASEA

Then let the people hear her. If  
her words are false, the people  
will know. If they are true – who  
are we to fear the truth?

A beat. Nero seethes. But the crowd begins to chant –

CROWD

(various)

Let the girl sing! Give her a  
chance! Rules is rules! C'mon Nero,  
ya big baby!

Nero simmers – trapped by his own scheme. With a bitter wave  
of his hand –

NERO

(to Thrasea)

Fine. Unchain her. But you forget,  
traitor: she must now perform. For  
the mob.

(MORE)

NERO (CONT'D)

Mars alone knows what this pathetic girl will do to win them over. They'll eat her alive.

Nero and his retinue retire back to the imperial box.

The guards obey. Vibia's wrists are freed.

She steps forward, facing the mob, the Emperor, the gods. Jo steps up to Vibia.

JO

You're going out there a food service professional, kid.

Vibia smiles.

JO (CONT'D)

This one's for all the Romans who never get heard. Do us proud, Vibia. (beat) We who are about to cry, salute you.

VIBIA

Thanks, Jo. For everything.

They embrace.

JO

Do you even have an act?

Vibia looks over to Castor and Pollux. They give her two thumbs up.

VIBIA

The twins and I have been working on a little something.

JO

Are you nervous?

Vibia looks at the crowd - then at Jo, smiling.

VIBIA

Miracles, Jo.

Castor and Pollux are handing out what looks like music scrolls to the band.

Vibia steps to centre stage, looking out at the roaring, uncertain sea of faces. The audience goes quiet.

BLACKOUT.

A voice rises in the dark. Calm, deliberate, carrying across the theatre:

## VIBIA (CONT'D)

(singing)

*I was quiet in the corner,  
 Alone and lost and small.  
 Let the louder ones be leaders –  
 I thought I had nothing at all.  
 But a whisper's a beginning,  
 And a spark can split the night.  
 I'm done with being silent  
 And I'm ready to ask why.  
 Why do we hide what we're made of?  
 Why do we wait to be seen?  
 What if the world needs your  
 colours  
 To finish the scene?  
 Let it be me who steps from the  
 shadow.  
 Let it be me who believes I belong.  
 We were born with a light meant to  
 travel –  
 Not to burn out alone,  
 but to carry it on.  
 If there's a heart that needs  
 lifting,  
 A soul lost at sea...  
 I won't wait for others –  
 Let it be me.  
 I remember the silence,  
 And the kindness that broke  
 through.  
 Just one voice from one who cared  
 Taught me what one voice can do.  
 We're threads of living colours,  
 Woven brighter the more we give.  
 You don't find your true purpose  
 'Til you help someone live.*

During the song, a ROMAN GIRL in the audience takes a nub of candle from her pocket. She tugs on her FATHER's cloak. Obligingly, he lights it with a taper from a nearby lantern. As the song progresses, more candles and lanterns are lit – the auditorium becoming a blaze of golden wonder; of hope. A thousand flickering flames – one community of light.

## VIBIA (CONT'D)

(singing)

*What if your voice is the echo  
 That someone's been aching to hear?  
 What if your courage  
 Is louder than fear?  
 Let it be me who says,  
 "You are worth it."  
 Let it be me who won't walk away.  
 Let me be part of the rising –  
 That turns a dark night into day.  
 If there's a truth that needs  
 speaking,  
 Or a dream yet to be...*

(MORE)

VIBIA (CONT'D)

*Won't wait for permission –  
Let it be me.  
One star alone may be quiet,  
But together we burn like the sun.  
You only become who you're meant to  
The moment you shine for someone.  
Let it be me who stands with the  
silent.  
Let it be me who opens the door.  
I will rise for the ones who were  
broken –  
And be something more than before.  
If love needs a fighter,  
If hope needs a key...  
I'll be the answer –  
Let it be me.*

JO

(moved beyond tears)  
Now that's theatre.

There is silence across the auditorium. No applause. No reaction the troupers can discern. No hope. Jo and the troupe look nervously at each other. It's over – their fate is sealed.

GEMELLUS

Look!

CAMERA PANS across the audience. Audible sobs. People are holding one another; many with tears in their eyes. Husbands are looking at their wives with new tenderness. Wives dab at their eyes with handkerchiefs. Children's eyes are lit with hope.

An ELDERLY WOMAN stands shakily, with help from her GRANDSON. She begins to applaud. Slowly, people come out of their reveries and join her. Within seconds, applause like a tidal wave sweeps the auditorium. Cheering, thundering; roaring love from the people of Rome.

Vibia has tears in her eyes. She looks at Jo. Then she looks at Attalus, who is sobbing like a baby on Jugurtha's shoulder – the great, hulking warrior reduced to a puddle of tears.

Nero's face – which at first is glittering with malevolent glee – slowly begins to fall as the ovation continues. WE SEE something there we haven't seen before: naked fear.

He rushes to the apron of the stage. The crowd hushes.

NERO

You approve, do you?

Murmurs ripple through the audience – uncertain, but mostly assent.

NERO (CONT'D)  
Well I... do not.

He begins to stalk the stage, venom building.

NERO (CONT'D)  
Sedition! Treachery! Lies! This...  
Christian believes your applause  
will save her.  
(beat)  
And perhaps... it might.

The crowd murmurs again – confused, wary.

NERO (CONT'D)  
Which of you will prove it? Which  
of you will face the executioner in  
her stead? Come now, Romans – who  
among you loves virtue more than  
life?

An uneasy silence. Heads drop. No one moves.

NERO (CONT'D)  
Hah! Just as I thought. Loyal  
Romans... until loyalty costs.

He lets the words sting. The silence stretches. Then,  
movement – a small figure pushes forward.

At the edge of the crowd, a ROMAN BOY – 12, grubby, trembling  
– steps into view.

NERO (CONT'D)  
What's this?

All eyes turn. The boy mumbles, inaudible. A burly LABOURER  
hoists him onto his shoulders.

ROMAN BOY  
I will, sir.

Nero falters, off-balance for the first time.

NERO  
You will – what?

ROMAN BOY  
I'll go to the axe. She said... she  
said, "let it be me." Help people.  
Be kind. Ain't hard to understand,  
sir.

A ripple of laughter – soft, not mocking. Nero's mask slips.

NERO  
 (to the audience)  
 And you? You'll allow this? A fine  
 Roman boy – for a traitor?

From the crowd, a young mother rises.

YOUNG MOTHER  
 I'll go to the axe.

Nero stares. Then a baker stands.

BAKER  
 And I.

NERO  
 But –

An elderly patrician lady stands – proud, unflinching.

PATRICIAN LADY  
 I will go.

The friendly ox lets out a deep, approving moo.

NERO  
 Sit down! Sit down, I command it!

But more stand – slaves, soldiers, Vestals, senators – the  
 swell of defiance growing until it's deafening. The theatre  
 is a sea of raised hands and voices.

Up in the balcony, a grizzled EX-GLADIATOR makes to stand.  
 His wife grabs his arm, exasperated.

WIFE  
 Oh not now, Spartacus – for Jove's  
 sake! (to her friend, exasperated)  
 He always does this.

The roar crests. The judges, pale and terrified, abandon Nero  
 entirely, hurrying forward with the laurel and a bulging bag  
 of gold. They thrust it at Jo and Vibia. Attalus joins them.  
 The crowd erupts.

The audience roars. The friendly ox beams. Gemellus pats him  
 proudly.

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT**

Torches blaze. A party in full swing. Laughter, tears,  
 applause.

Thrasea stands near the stage, beside Gemellus. Their  
 shoulders touch – then linger. Gemellus leans closer, cheeks  
 flushed. Thrasea smiles, and gently takes his hand.

Nearby, CHILDREN tug on Attalus' tunic.

CHILD 1  
Can I ride the gladiator?

CHILD 2  
No fair! I called him first!

Attalus drops to all fours with a theatrical groan, letting them climb on. He meets Vibia's eyes and makes a funny face. She watches, arms crossed, smiling – completely smitten.

VIBIA  
Tamed at last.

Drolio is being hoisted shoulder-high by audience members – stunned, laughing, arms flailing like he's riding a chariot.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1  
I saw this old bastard do stand-up.  
I've seen funnier mimes! Who knew  
he had this in him!?

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2  
And I'm crying at Attalus the  
actor, man! Attalus! Can you  
believe that?

HECKLER (O.S.)  
What are you guys talking about?  
That sucked! (chanting) Nero, Nero,  
Nero!

We hear a "thump".

HECKLER (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
Oww!

Jugurtha walks back from dealing with the irritant.

JUGURTHA  
Everyone's a critic.

**EXT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - ROOF - NIGHT**

From above: Nero in half-light – un-cheered, unbowed, un-missed. The applause belongs to someone else.

A torch burns in a brazier, its flames restless in the breeze. Nero stares at it, head tilted, as if the fire is whispering.

NERO  
(singing softly)  
*If I burned down the city..?*

The smile that forms is slow, private, and just a little too wide. He brushes his fingers against the flickering flame.

NERO (CONT'D)

No. Not yet. Let them think they've won... for now. I'll bide my time. After all...

(beat)

I really think I could win this thing next year.

He turns away, vanishing into the dark. Behind him, the torch flares.

**INT. COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA - NIGHT**

The troupe is back where it all began.

Laughter, tankards clinking. Silvia telling a tale. Fabianus creased with laughter. Metrobius and Drolio deep in chat.

Castor and Pollux arguing over which scene got the most applause. Paracles trying to sign them up as clients.

Jugurtha and Galla flirting shamelessly by lamplight.

Gemellus sitting with Thrasea; holding hands, their knees touching, stealing glances. Glowing.

Attalus and Vibia tucked into a corner booth, arms looped lazily around one another, heads resting together. The gladiator-turned-actor makes eye contact with Gemellus and raises his tankard. They share a smile that says everything required.

Jo sits quietly in the middle of it all, but alone; tankard in hand, content. Attalus approaches, sitting beside him.

ATTALUS

Why so quiet, Jo?

JO

I was thinking: now what?

ATTALUS

With all the gold and glory from tonight, surely the world's your, um...

Vibia is passing round a tray.

VIBIA

Oyster?

JO  
I'm good, thanks. Well, with Nero  
on my case, I'm thinking...  
extended tour of Egypt?

They both chuckle.

JO (CONT'D)  
Anyway, what's next for you,  
Attalus the Actor?

ATTALUS  
Well, making some kid of life with  
Vibia...

JO  
Duh - what else?

ATTALUS  
I haven't told anybody this, but  
what I really want to do...

JO  
(wincing)  
Don't say it.

ATTALUS  
What I really want to do... is  
direct.

The others inhale sharply - Vibia walks over and puts her  
hand on Attalus' mighty shoulder.

JO  
Oh boy. Well... we'll talk.

VIBIA  
C'mon, big guy - we need more wine.

Attalus smiles and heads off for another amphora.

Vibia sits down with Jo, smiling. Then:

VIBIA (CONT'D)  
Direct? Seriously?

JO  
Of course not. Can you imagine?

They both chuckle. Then: Jo gets a faraway look in his eye.

JO (CONT'D)  
Although...

He turns to Castor and Pollux.

JO (CONT'D)  
 Hey fellas. How do you feel about  
 an encore?

The twins grin. Music swells.

**EXT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - NIGHT**

A sign outside a Roman theatre: ONE NIGHT ONLY: MUSICAL  
 THEATRE. Scribbled underneath: HONESTLY, IT'S NOT THAT BAD!

**INT. THEATRE OF DIONYSUS - NIGHT**

MONTAGE: "Gladiator! The Musical".

Attalus in heroic armour, centre stage, loving every minute.

Castor and Pollux leading a chorus of "gladiator girls"  
 waving laurel wreaths.

Vibia singing a comic song about Attalus: "brawn without  
 brain/ain't much of a pain."

Gemellus is singing and has a "wardrobe malfunction" that  
 causes his torso to be exposed. The audience goes wild and  
 Gemellus - shy at first - responds by playing along.

JO  
 (whispering from the  
 wings)  
 Stop showing off!

Metrobius gliding in with a verse that half-mocks, half-  
 praises Attalus as "the man who stole my spotlight and Rome's  
 heart."

Fabianus and Silvia playing a gentle romantic scene that has  
 the audience in tears of delight.

Drolio tap-dancing in sandals.

CUTAWAYS TO THE AUDIENCE:

Paracles, laughing helplessly.

Galla, transformed with joy. Jugurtha with his big arm  
 proudly around her.

Thrasea - in the wings holding a bunch of flowers - lost in  
 love.

Gaius Donatus shouting "That's my boy!" to anyone who'll  
 listen.

The friendly ox nodding his head in time to the music.

JO (CONT'D)

(singing)

When the world feels heavy,  
 And the road feels long,  
 When you're not quite certain  
 Where you still belong,  
 When the noise grows louder  
 And the light grows slight,  
 Come stand here together –  
 It'll be alright.  
 When your heart is restless,  
 When your courage shakes,  
 When you fear that nothing  
 Can be mended now it breaks,  
 There is something stronger  
 Than the dark in sight:  
 All of us together –  
 It'll be alright.  
 So show up, show up,  
 Even scared, even tired,  
 Even when the spark in you  
 Feels dimmed instead of fired.  
 Come with all your questions,  
 Come with all your fright,  
 Come and stand beside us –  
 It'll be alright on the night.  
 We are not made only  
 For the days that shine,  
 Not for perfect endings  
 Drawn in gold design,  
 We are made for holding  
 Fast when hope is slight,  
 For lifting one another  
 Till the world feels light.  
 There is no great power  
 In standing all alone,  
 Every hand reaches outward,  
 Every heart needs home,  
 And the smallest kindness  
 Can outlast the night –  
 If we keep together,  
 It'll be alright.  
 So show up, show up,  
 With your joy and your doubt,  
 With the parts of you you carry  
 And the parts you've hidden out.  
 Bring your hope in tatters,  
 Bring your will to fight,  
 Bring your human heart here –  
 It'll be alright on the night.  
 When the day has failed us,  
 When the dream looks thin,  
 When the doors are closing  
 And the cold gets in,  
 Still a voice can answer,  
 Still a flame burn bright,  
 Still we make a shelter  
 For each other in the night.

(MORE)

JO (CONT'D)

Not because we're certain,  
 Not because we know,  
 Not because tomorrow  
 Will be easy as we go,  
 But because we're stronger  
 When we stand in shared light,  
 And because we need each other  
 To make the darkness bright.  
 So gather, gather,  
 Come out of the shade,  
 No one walks this whole road  
 Un-held and unafraid.  
 Bring your broken pieces,  
 Bring your truth in plain sight,  
 We will make a chorus -  
 It'll be alright on the night.  
 And if the sky should tremble,  
 And if the fears return,  
 Still we'll face the silence,  
 Still we'll help the fire burn.  
 Side by side, we'll answer,  
 Side by side, we'll write  
 A better kind of story:  
 It'll be alright.  
 So show up, show up,  
 That is how we start,  
 Not with grand illusions,  
 But with one another's heart.  
 Hand in hand, we'll face it,  
 Turning toward the light -  
 If we show up for each other,  
 It'll be alright on the night.  
 It'll be alright,  
 Yes, it'll be alright,  
 If we show up for each other,  
 It'll be alright on the night.

Confetti falls. The crowd leaps to their feet. Jo bows with the troupe, looking out over the roaring house.

JO (CONT'D)

Now that's... a love story.

FADE OUT:

OVER BLACK:

FINIS

**THE END.**