

Opening title card:

**Women of Yore
A Triptych**

(All title cards and credits are in black text on white background, in Perpetua font.)

EXT. A GROVE OF ALMOND TREES - THE PALACE OF THE TETRARCH - DAY

White screen cuts to sunlight flickering through blossoming tree leaves. Shimmering music is heard in the underscoring. The title **Salome** appears in the bottom left corner of the frame.

Cross-fade into blossoms falling.

Cross-fade into the image of a young Hebrew girl in her mid-teens. This is SALOME. Her eyes are closed and her face glows in contentment. Blossoms fall lightly upon her head. She opens her eyes and gazes forward contemplatively. She then looks up at the sunlight flickering through the leaves.

Cut to white.

Title card:

JUDEA, A.D. 36

The music ends. We now see that sitting next to SALOME under the tree is another young Hebrew girl of similar age. This is SALOME'S friend MIRIAM. Both sit cross-legged on the ground, and are wearing embroidered tunics and laced sandals. Blossoms fall lightly and intermittently around them. The day is bright with sunshine.

SALOME

You are a witness, Miriam. At this moment, I am truly at peace. *Shalom*.

MIRIAM

The palace gardens are wondrously beautiful. How fortunate you are, Salome, to be surrounded by so much of God's beauty.

SALOME

We are fortunate, Miriam. There are very few places of peace left in the world.

SALOME closes her eyes, sniffs the air, and blissfully smiles.

SALOME

But here, amongst the spring blossoms

MIRIAM plucks a blossom from the ground and ostentatiously smells it.

MIRIAM

They have a truly marvelous fragrance.

SALOME opens her eyes and contemplates the blossoms as they fall in her hand.

SALOME

And they dance upon the air, like snow . . . have you ever seen snow, Miriam?

MIRIAM

I seem to remember once, when I was a little girl.

SALOME smiles wistfully.

SALOME

I don't remember my childhood - and yet some still consider me a child.

MIRIAM

Who?

SALOME

My mother . . . and the tetrarch.

MIRIAM

Is it not something to be the daughter of the king of Judea?

SALOME

He is not a king. He is merely -

SALOME blows the blossoms out of her hand.

SALOME

- the tetrarch.

MIRIAM

There are some who say a new king of Israel is coming.

SALOME

Yes -

SALOME smirks and turns to look at MIRIAM.

SALOME

- and my parents are terrified of them.

They both laugh.

SALOME

I am happy you are here with me, Miriam. I am truly at peace.

MIRIAM

Then I am happy for you.

SALOME once again glances at the falling blossoms.

SALOME

If only I could bring this sense of peace to the world
- outside

SALOME gazes around at the garden with a sigh.

SALOME

Sometimes I feel as if the palace is a cage. Sometimes I feel as if the cage is meant to hold the rest of the world without - and keep me in. I have seen little of the world outside. But if I could -- find a way . . . I could share this feeling of peace, and love, and completeness.

MIRIAM

How?

SALOME looks at the ground with a slight embarrassed laugh.

SALOME

I don't know. I was never taught how to write.

MIRIAM pauses in thought for a moment and then brightens.

MIRIAM

You could dance for them.

SALOME looks up at MIRIAM with gleaming eyes.

SALOME

Do you think so?

MIRIAM

Oh, I love to watch you dance, Salome.

SALOME glances upward and shudders slightly with exhilaration.

SALOME

It is true that when one dances, one finds *Shalom*.

MIRIAM

Would you dance for me, Salome?

SALOME grins ebulliently at MIRIAM and stands up

SALOME commences her dance within the shade of the blossoming tree. The dance is blissful and celebratory. The accompanying music in the underscoring is a delicate and joyous piece for guitar. SALOME'S gestures throughout the dance communicate passion, wonderment, and ecstasy. The dance lasts for three or four minutes, in one continuous take.

At the conclusion of her dance, SALOME alights onto the ground, sweating and breathing heavily from her exertions.

MIRIAM claps enthusiastically.

SALOME laughs joyfully in the sunlight.

Fade out.

EXT. PATH AND WALL - THE PALACE OF THE TETRARCH - DUSK

At sunset, two soldiers are leading a bedraggled man with long hair and beard, dressed in rags, along a path that passes beneath the residence of the tetrarch and his family. The man in rags is JOHN THE BAPTIST. He gazes forward with a blank, haggard stare.

The soldiers are met by the palace guards. As the soldiers prepare to turn him over to the guards, JOHN THE BAPTIST glances up at a window overhead.

From where he stands, JOHN THE BAPTIST can see SALOME looking down at him from the window.

INT. BEDROOM - THE PALACE OF THE TETRARCH - DUSK

SALOME watches from her window as the palace guards take custody of JOHN THE BAPTIST. Just then, a woman's voice is heard off-screen from within the room. This is HERODIAS.

HERODIAS (o-s)

Daughter?

SALOME turns and looks.

HERODIAS stands expectantly at the door with two ladies-in-waiting.

HERODIAS

Daughter, come away from the window. It's time for you to dress yourself for the tetrarch's birthday supper.

SALOME remains standing at the window.

SALOME

Mother, who is that man that was just taken into custody by the guards?

There is a pregnant pause as a look of annoyance comes over HERODIAS' face.

HERODIAS

I said, come away from the window.

SALOME obeys her mother and goes to sit at her dressing vanity. HERODIAS motions to the two ladies-in-waiting, who proceed to prepare SALOME'S hair and jewelry.

HERODIAS

You must look your best, daughter.

SALOME stares blankly into the vanity mirror as the two ladies-in-waiting fuss with her hair. HERODIAS paces the floor slowly behind them.

HERODIAS

The tetrarch would not be pleased if you came to his birthday supper in such a disturbed fashion.

SALOME

I was dancing for Miriam.

HERODIAS

Yes, I know how important your dancing is to you.

SALOME makes a face in the mirror that HERODIAS does not see.

HERODIAS

But more important is that you represent your family with the dignity and gravity expected of the daughter of Herod.

SALOME

Stepdaughter.

HERODIAS

If you decide to make yourself trouble tonight, you will spend the next three days dancing in this room -- alone!

SALOME gazes sullenly in the mirror.

SALOME

Is my dancing such an embarrassment to you?

HERODIAS pauses and frowns.

HERODIAS

It is unbecoming of someone in your station.

SALOME

Your husband doesn't seem to mind.

HERODIAS

That will be enough from you, daughter! Now stand up.

SALOME obediently stands as the two ladies-in-waiting prepare her evening dress.

HERODIAS walks over to the window and gazes out at the pink and purple sunset.

SALOME

Mother?

HERODIAS replies with her back to SALOME.

HERODIAS

Yes?

SALOME

Who was that man taken into custody by the guards?

HERODIAS turns to face SALOME with cruelty in her eyes.

HERODIAS

You are a difficult child.

EXT. PALACE GARDENS - THE PALACE OF THE TETRARCH - EVENING

Stars are visible overhead. Strange plucked-string melodies are heard in the background.

The tetrarch's birthday supper is held in an ornately decorated area of the palace gardens lit by braziers of fire situated on tripods around the perimeter. The dinner guests, including CAESAR'S AMBASSADOR, recline on couches around a large, round, low table laden with food. HEROD reclines on the uppermost couch, with HERODIAS and SALOME to his right. The scene begins in mid-conversation.

DINNER GUEST 1

- as the law was written. It is a testimony to God's will, and we do not need insolent young men to come up out of the filth and challenge God's law.

The other dinner guests murmur their assent. HEROD, only half-listening to the discussion, glances at SALOME.

SALOME, lying on her stomach, nibbles at some food and ignores HEROD and everyone else.

CAESAR'S AMBASSADOR

A permissive environment is pervading the streets. Rabble-rousers; we have them at Rome, as well. They believe much can be gained by inflaming the mob against their rightful masters.

Grumblings from the dinner guests. SALOME raises her eyes.

HEROD watches SALOME as he drinks from his cup.

CAESAR'S AMBASSADOR

However, the maggots are being purged as we speak. Indeed, with the arrest of the notorious John the Baptist, our gracious host has, once again, shown his customary wisdom.

CAESAR'S AMBASSADOR raises a cup to HEROD. The dinner guests applaud.

SALOME looks up sharply at HEROD. When their eyes meet, she quickly looks away.

HERODIAS notices this. The applause dies down.

CAESAR'S AMBASSADOR

No one will be permitted to insult the ruler of Judea
-

CAESAR'S AMBASSADOR raises his cup to HERODIAS.

CAESAR'S AMBASSADOR

- or his wife.

HEROD addresses CAESAR'S AMBASSADOR with a smile.

HEROD

As a representative of Caesar, you humble me with your kind words. We will of course maintain proper authority here in the province in accordance with his wishes.

HEROD motions to a servant to fill his cup.

HEROD

Yes, gentlemen, we do live in somewhat troubling times; but also wondrous times. The blossoms bloom, the fruit ripens, the larks sing. Our noble Caesar Tiberius enjoys good health. The poetry of our creator surrounds us all with its - generous beauty.

HEROD leers at SALOME.

HEROD

I have been blessed with many gifts on my birthday. I am - truly at peace.

SALOME continues to look away from HEROD.

HERODIAS discreetly observes.

Meanwhile the dinner guests begin to notice HEROD'S fixation on his stepdaughter.

DINNER GUEST 1

We are - blessed to be a part of this - great celebration.

HEROD

Salome?

SALOME shoots a quick glance at HEROD and then turns back to her meal.

HEROD

Do you know what I should like to have for my birthday?

SALOME

What?

HEROD narrows his eyes at SALOME.

SALOME looks up in the ensuing silence, glances at HERODIAS, and then looks HEROD in the eye.

SALOME

What, my lord?

HEROD

I would like you to dance for me.

SALOME turns and stares at the table.

HEROD addresses his guests.

HEROD

My daughter is a marvelous dancer. She gambols like a gentle angel at play. It is truly a joy and a blessing to behold. Dance for me, Salome. Dance for us all! If

you do, I will give you anything you ask. Yes, on my birthday, I will make a gift to you.

SALOME continues to stare at the table.

HERODIAS is thoughtful.

HEROD

Just ask - anything you like. I will give you - half of my kingdom.

The dinner guests turn their heads simultaneously from SALOME to HEROD with looks of astonishment.

HEROD winks at them and then looks back at SALOME.

SALOME continues to stare at the table.

HEROD

Salome?

HERODIAS leans over and whispers something in SALOME'S ear. SALOME does not respond; her face grows pale and she begins to tremble.

The dinner guests look on with concern.

HERODIAS

I'm deeply sorry, my lord, I -- daughter, are you ill?

SALOME turns and glares at HERODIAS.

HERODIAS' face hardens as she addresses HEROD and the guests.

HERODIAS

Gentlemen, excuse us.

HERODIAS commands SALOME with gestures to rise. They both leave the garden.

HEROD'S mood darkens as he watches them leave.

CAESAR'S AMBASSADOR stares at the table, nibbling food.

CAESAR'S AMBASSADOR

Quite a headstrong little girl you have there, Herod.

HEROD

She's not mine.

HEROD downs a cup of wine.

INT. CORRIDOR/ANTEROOM - THE PALACE OF THE TETRARCH - EVENING

HERODIAS drags SALOME by the arm down a corridor and into a small anteroom to confront her. The room contains spare furniture stacked along the walls, and is illuminated by moonlight streaming in through a lattice window. SALOME rubs her arm after her mother releases her.

HERODIAS

Was it your purpose all along to embarrass the tetrarch on his birthday - in front of his guests - in front of the emperor's ambassador?

SALOME

Mother, please - please don't make me ask for that -

HERODIAS

That Baptist is a traitor and a heathen! He publicly humiliated me - accusing me of incest!

SALOME pauses and stares at her mother with cold eyes.

SALOME

You did abandon my father to take up with his brother.

HERODIAS' expression becomes fierce.

HERODIAS

Daughter, you provoke me -

SALOME

Mother, I care not of these things. Why must I be the one to ask for his death?

HERODIAS

It is not important. You will do what the tetrarch asks of you. You will dance for him like you dance for your little friends. And when you are finished, you will ask the tetrarch to bring you the head of that damned Baptist!

SALOME stares trembling at HERODIAS in disbelief.

HERODIAS

On a golden charger!

SALOME

You - want me to dance - for his death -

HERODIAS

Daughter, you must understand that our subjects simply cannot be permitted to insult the tetrarch and his family. If we do not make an example out of this wretched provincial, then the very social order itself is in peril. The tetrarch will not permit it. Caesar will not permit it. God will not permit it. Now go and change into something that will please your father.

SALOME

Mother, no, I - please. Don't ask this of me. If you want me to dance for Herod, I will dance for him. But don't make me dance for the Baptist's death.

HERODIAS slowly approaches SALOME and stands before her.

SALOME

Mother, listen, please - Miriam and I were just discussing today how dance is an expression of *Shalom* and -

HERODIAS suddenly pushes SALOME hard and violently against the wall.

SALOME cries out as she hits the wall, falls into the stacked chairs, and slides to the floor. SALOME, in shock, crawls a few inches on her hands and knees, as if groping for something.

HERODIAS looks down at her daughter with a pained expression.

HERODIAS

I wish I could remember exactly when it was that you became such a difficult child.

SALOME, on her hands and knees, stunned, bows her head.

Fade out.

INT. MAIN RECEPTION HALL - THE PALACE OF THE TETRARCH - NIGHT

The main reception hall has vast ceilings, columns, and arches, all ornately decorated. The room is lit by censers depending from the ceiling. There is an unaccountable mist permeating the air. HEROD sits upon his throne in the center of the room with HERODIAS to his left. CAESAR'S AMBASSADOR, along with the other dinner guests, lounges on a couch nearby. Musicians in the corner perform on drums, reeds, and lutes. The music is rhythmic, but heavy and solemn.

SALOME enters stage right. She is poised, statuesque, and yet her facial expression is one of quiet anguish. She is barefoot but clothed in an elaborate wrap-around dress decorated with peacock feathers. Gold bracelets adorn her bare arms and wrists. Her head is partly covered by a headscarf that falls down her back. The floor is dotted with white rose petals.

Without acknowledging her parents, SALOME begins her dance. It is mournful, expressive, like a funeral dance, and is presented in one continuous take. Her gestures throughout the dance communicate fear, lamentation, and anger.

At certain intervals during the dance, SALOME pauses, her face or head in her hands, summoning the will to continue.

The entire performance lasts for five or six minutes, and builds to a desperate climax, before ending abruptly.

When SALOME finishes her dance, the room is quiet, save SALOME, breathing heavy from her exertions.

HERODIAS glances expectantly at HEROD.

HEROD looks at SALOME with a somewhat perplexed expression.

SALOME, sweating and panting, turns and walks slowly and determinedly towards HEROD. She approaches his throne and stands before him.

HEROD gazes up at SALOME with desire.

SALOME bends down and whispers inaudibly in his ear. SALOME and HEROD both turn and look at HERODIAS - SALOME in disdain, HEROD in surprise and then resignation.

HERODIAS fixes SALOME with a gaze of intense severity.

SALOME slowly backs away, glaring with combined hatred and sadness at her mother. SALOME then turns and leaves the hall.

INT. A CORRIDOR LEADING TO AND FROM THE MAIN RECEPTION HALL
- THE PALACE OF THE TETRARCH - NIGHT

SALOME, still garbed in her peacock feather dress, is walking quickly and determinedly away from the main reception hall, down a large and empty corridor, lit by torches along the walls. There is a look of intense bitterness in her eyes.

Coming in the opposite direction is JOHN THE BAPTIST, led by two guards.

SALOME raises her hand for them to stop. They pause.

JOHN THE BAPTIST slowly raises his eyes from the floor and looks at SALOME. The two gaze at each other silently for a moment, their expressions communicating at first bewilderment, then sorrow, and, finally, empathy.

The guards lead JOHN THE BAPTIST away.

SALOME stands alone for a moment, and then continues down the corridor.

EXT. ENTRANCE GATE AND PATH TO THE PALACE OF THE TETRARCH -
NIGHT

SALOME, still garbed in her peacock feather dress, emerges from the shadows of the arched entrance gate of the palace. Two guards stand on either side of the gate; they salute her as she emerges. She ignores them and pauses, gazing at the path ahead.

The path is partially concealed by a mist that floats across the ground. The path, crowned by the full moon, leads away from the palace, into the desert night.

With a smile full of hope and purpose, SALOME continues on her way, down the moonlit path until she disappears into the evening mist.

Cross-fade into the next scene.

EXT. A HILLSIDE FACING A VALLEY - CARTHAGE - DAY

The mist from the previous scene cross-fades into sunlit cumulus clouds floating in the same direction across a blue sky. Ethereal, elegiac music slowly fades up in the underscoring. The title **Perpetua** appears in the bottom left corner of the frame. The clouds are floating languorously over a mountain range.

A young African woman sits on a hill on the opposite side of the valley, her arms folded around her knees. This is PERPETUA.

PERPETUA gazes at the clouds, her expression a combination of transcendence and awe.

The clouds move slowly across the sky in time to the music.

PERPETUA remains entranced until a male voice is heard off-screen. This is SATURUS.

SATURUS (o-s)

Perpetua?

PERPETUA comes out of her trance and gazes off-screen.

A young African man in a white tunic is coming up the hill towards her, smiling in the sunlight. This is SATURUS, the catechist.

SATURUS

It is time for the baptism.

PERPETUA replies with a look of joyful expectation.

Cut to white.

Title card:

CARTHAGE, A.D. 203

EXT. A HILL IN THE FOREST LEADING DOWN TO A RIVER - CARTHAGE - DAY

PERPETUA and her fellow catechumens walk in a procession down a lush embankment towards a river. Her fellow catechumens include: two slaves, REVOCATUS, a young man, and FELICITAS, a young woman; and two free men, SATURNINUS and SECUNDULUS. SATURUS is leading them.

Sunbeams glimmer through the trees overhead.

SATURUS turns as he walks to address the group, his arms spread out.

SATURUS

The Lord is truly with us. We could not have asked for a more beautiful day to become one with him.

The catechumens respond in agreement with various "Amens."

PERPETUA gazes around at the group with joy and anticipation.

FELICITAS

I feel dappled in grace already.

SECUNDULUS glances back over his right shoulder at PERPETUA and the others.

SECUNDULUS

I hope the water isn't slimy.

PERPETUA smiles at SECUNDULUS and giggles.

The catechumens arrive at the river's edge.

PERPETUA wades into the shallows and caresses the surface with her fingers.

SATURUS and one of the male catechumens cradle PERPETUA as they lower her gently into the water.

As they lower PERPETUA'S head beneath the surface, the underscoring fades out, replaced with the muffled sound of submergence.

PERPETUA opens her eyes under water and gazes up at the sun.

POV shot of sunlight flickering through the ripples of the water.

INT. PAVILION - CARTHAGE - DAY

Trees stir in the breeze.

The catechumens assemble inside a colonnaded pavilion situated in a wooded area. It is late afternoon. SATURUS addresses them.

SATURUS

By now, all of you understand what your baptism signifies. The consequences were explained to you; you were given the chance to refuse.

SATURUS smiles in exultation.

SATURUS

But God is strong within you, my sisters and brothers; and by your own volition, you have accepted your immersion into the body of Christ. God be praised!

The catechumens respond with "Amen."

PERPETUA listens intently to what SATURUS has to say.

SATURUS

Soon we will be called to the judicial procurator. He has been charged with ferreting out those of us who . . . misbehave.

PERPETUA and the other catechumens nervously laugh.

SATURUS

For not only are we now baptized in God's grace -- we are now enemies of the state.

SATURNINUS

Better that than an enemy of Christ!

The group erupts into shouts of agreement and approval.

PERPETUA glances around at the others anxiously.

SATURUS raises his hands to quiet them.

SATURUS

Brothers and sisters, in the days ahead we must be secure in our wits. The devil will lay many traps for us. Yet God will grant us the means necessary to triumph over the unclean spirit. These may come in the form of signs or visions.

PERPETUA glances aside thoughtfully.

SATURUS

But however the Lord speaks to us, it is important now that no matter how much we may displease our noble Caesar, know that each of us is blessed, and therefore loved. Your faith, your conscience, your spirit, the light of truth within you: these things will always be yours, whatever else they may take from you.

The group is silent for a moment. PERPETUA reflects on what may lie ahead.

SATURUS

We have come this far together. Let us pray.

The group joins hands in prayer.

Overhead trees stir in the breeze.

Fade out.

INT. JUDICIAL CHAMBERS, THE OFFICIAL QUARTERS OF THE PROCURATOR
- CARTHAGE - DAY

A bust of the emperor Septimius Severus, painted in gaudy colors, sits upon a pedestal.

A bearded man gazes upon it, standing before it with his hands folded behind his back. This is HILARIANUS, the procurator. After a few moments of gazing at the bust with a determined expression, we hear the sounds of people entering the room. HILARIANUS turns and looks towards the door.

Armed guards escort PERPETUA, SATURUS, and the other four catechumens into the room.

HILARIANUS, looking tired, walks over to a large marble desk nearby and sits behind it.

The catechumens are brought before him. They are situated about five feet from the desk, in a row, with PERPETUA standing on his far right.

While they are being situated by the guards, HILARIANUS scribbles on a piece of parchment. He continues scribbling after the catechumens have been situated, creating a long awkward silence.

PERPETUA glances at HILARIANUS nervously.

After a moment, HILARIANUS sets down his stylus and parchment, and looks up with tired eyes at his prisoners.

HILARIANUS

I, Hilarianus, procurator of this province, successor to proconsul Timinianus, recently deceased, have been charged by our emperor Septimius -

HILARIANUS gestures at the bust on the pedestal.

The catechumens glance furtively over at the bust of Septimius.

The face of the bust is gaudy with its brightly colored, staring eyes.

HILARIANUS

- with enforcing the laws of the imperium. There persist rumors of doubt about your loyalty to the state, to the emperor, and to the true gods. All are one, by the law! To embrace any faith contrary to the true gods is treason. Therefore, those who have been baptized as Christians, or have taken to the religion of the Jews, have been deemed - enemies of the state.

The catechumens all register different expressions in response to this statement.

HILARIANUS

If you do not forswear your loyalty to what the state considers a - treasonable cult, you will be condemned to the wild beasts of the arena on an appointed date in the near future.

PERPETUA looks aside out a nearby window.

Through the window can be seen sunlit flora.

HILARIANUS

If, however, you swear, here and now, your allegiance to the true -

HILARIANUS notices PERPETUA'S distraction, glances over his shoulder to see what she's staring at, then turns back to her and clears his throat.

PERPETUA turns her attention back to the procurator.

HILARIANUS

If, however, you swear, here and now, your allegiance to the true gods, and offer sacrifice for the well-being of the emperor - then you may go home.

HILARIANUS waits, tapping his fingers impatiently on the desk while eyeing the catechumens.

The catechumens all remain silent and stoic.

HILARIANUS sighs through his nose and reaches for a list of names on a piece of parchment. He turns to the first catechumen on his far left.

HILARIANUS

Do you swear allegiance to the true gods?

SECUNDULUS

I am a Christian.

HILARIANUS turns to the next catechumen.

HILARIANUS

Do you swear allegiance to the true gods?

FELICITAS

I am a Christian.

HILARIANUS turns to the next catechumen.

HILARIANUS

Do you swear allegiance to the true gods?

SATURNINUS

I am a Christian.

HILARIANUS turns to the next catechumen.

HILARIANUS

Do you swear allegiance to the true gods?

REVOCATUS

I am a Christian.

HILARIANUS turns to the next catechumen.

HILARIANUS

Do you swear allegiance to the true gods?

SATURUS grins.

SATURUS

I am a Christian.

HILARIANUS turns to the next catechumen.

HILARIANUS

Do you swear allegiance to the true gods?

PERPETUA casts one final glance out at the garden and the sunlight, and then turns to HILARIANUS.

PERPETUA

I am a Christian.

Cut to black.

INT. PRISON CELL - CARTHAGE - DAY

(From this point onward, PERPETUA and her fellow prisoners begin to show signs of progressively worse hygiene, except in PERPETUA'S visions.)

Fade in. The prison cell is a small featureless stone room, dimly lit by a single thin recessed window high off the floor.

PERPETUA sits upright in a corner on the straw-covered floor, leaning against the wall, with her arms around her knees. She gazes in contemplation up at the window overhead.

A solitary cumulus cloud, moving slowly across a blue sunlit sky, is visible through the window.

Daylight from the window shines down upon PERPETUA'S face.

Suddenly the cell door opens as the WARDER ushers in a middle-aged man. This is PERPETUA'S FATHER.

The WARDER closes the door.

PERPETUA does not rise but looks at her father with both affection and apprehension.

PERPETUA'S FATHER stands for a moment, but when he realizes she is not standing up to meet him, he comes forward to her, stooping further and further until he is on his knees in front of her.

The two stare at each other for a moment in silence.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

I came to bring you out.

PERPETUA

Oh, father

PERPETUA'S FATHER

No! It is decided. I will not allow my daughter to die in the arena.

PERPETUA

Father, it - it is not in your power to decide.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

You are mine now! Your husband has deserted you. I will now decide. You will make sacrifice to the emperor and come home to your family.

PERPETUA smiles at him warmly.

PERPETUA

Nothing would please me more than to come home.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

There! Now you see the madness in this. It is decided.

PERPETUA shakes her head and chuckles.

PERPETUA

Oh, father

PERPETUA'S FATHER

You mock me?

PERPETUA

No, father, but you must understand that nothing can cast me down from the faith. It is not a matter of argument. I simply cannot turn away from God.

PERPETUA'S FATHER begins grimacing in fear and frustration.

PERPETUA

I understand that it is out of affection for me that you make this plea, but - it is useless.

PERPETUA'S FATHER bows his head at her feet.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

Have pity, my daughter. Have pity on your father, if I am worthy to be called a father by you.

PERPETUA fidgets uncomfortably.

PERPETUA'S FATHER looks up and raises his hands to her.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

If with these hands I have brought you up to this flower of your age, if I have preferred you to your brothers, please, do not deliver me up to the scorn of men. Have regard to your brother; have regard to your mother; have regard to your baby.

PERPETUA momentarily closes her eyes.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

Lay aside your - your pride, your stubbornness, and do not bring us all to destruction; for none of us will be able to speak in freedom if you should suffer anything.

PERPETUA opens her eyes and gazes up at the cloud through the window.

PERPETUA

On that scaffold whatever God wills shall happen.

PERPETUA turns her gaze to her father.

PERPETUA

Dear father, know that we are not placed in our own power, but in that of God.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

What - god is this you prattle of? This faith of yours - it is madness - madness and treason!

PERPETUA looks squarely at her father.

PERPETUA

You shame me, father.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

You disgrace your family - dishonor the gods - defy the emperor - all for a silly faith? You - you would - sacrifice yourself to words spoken by a dead Jew? Oh, daughter, how weak-minded you have been to be taken in by these good-for-nothings! How can you know what they say is true? What is this god? It is a whim. Yes, you see, that's all it is, a whim!

PERPETUA'S FATHER affects a forced calm and takes PERPETUA'S hands in his.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

Years from now, you will marvel that it ever occurred to you.

PERPETUA gazes pensively at her father in silence.

PERPETUA

These are the devil's arguments.

PERPETUA'S FATHER releases her hands, clenches his fists, and begins beating his legs in frustration.

PERPETUA reaches over to stop him.

PERPETUA

Father, please, listen.

PERPETUA'S FATHER stops hurting himself but continues to fume. He refrains from looking PERPETUA in the eye.

PERPETUA

Uh, let me see, uh -

PERPETUA looks around and spies a clay water pitcher nearby on the floor. She reaches for it and brings it over to them.

PERPETUA

Father, do you see this vessel here as a pitcher of water, or something else?

PERPETUA'S FATHER frowns impatiently at her.

PERPETUA waits.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

It is a pitcher of water.

PERPETUA

Can it be called by any other name than what it is?

PERPETUA'S FATHER

No.

PERPETUA

Neither can I call myself anything else than what I am, a Christian.

PERPETUA sets the vessel down.

PERPETUA'S FATHER stares at her with a look of increasing hopelessness.

PERPETUA

Father, it is not out of ill-will towards my family that I embrace this faith. It is not out of disobedience to the emperor. It is -

PERPETUA smiles ebulliently.

PERPETUA

It is simply what I am.

PERPETUA'S FATHER begins to tremble as tears come to his eyes. PERPETUA reaches out to wipe them away.

PERPETUA

Oh, father, please do not weep. You should be happy for me.

PERPETUA'S FATHER suddenly rises and grabs her violently by the arms in an attempt to pull her to her feet.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

You are coming with me now! I command you!

PERPETUA cries out and struggles with him as he attempts to drag her across the floor.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

You stubborn, stupid little girl!

The WARDER enters the room and addresses PERPETUA'S FATHER in a loud commanding voice.

WARDER

Remove your hands from the prisoner this instant!

PERPETUA'S FATHER stops and, without turning around, releases her.

WARDER

Disturbances are not permitted in the dungeon! You will leave now!

PERPETUA'S FATHER looks down at his daughter in sorrow for a moment.

PERPETUA looks up at her father fearfully.

PERPETUA'S FATHER then turns abruptly and leaves the cell.

The WARDER checks to make sure PERPETUA is unharmed.

PERPETUA adjusts her garment and resumes her seat.

The WARDER departs.

PERPETUA gazes in dejection at the water in the pitcher.

INT. SUBTERRANEAN CHAMBER - TIME OF DAY UNKNOWN

The pitcher of water from the previous scene becomes a large semicircular fountain.

PERPETUA finds herself within a large room, its walls and floors not unlike her prison cell, but with no visible window or door. The room is lit from above by an unseen source. The dusty light is strongest in the center of the room, creating shadows in the corners.

PERPETUA sits in shadow against the wall as in the prison cell.

From across the room she sees a small figure crouched in the shadows.

PERPETUA squints but cannot make out the face.

All that can be discerned is that it is a child, no older than seven. This is DINOCRATES.

PERPETUA

Hello?

DINOCRATES does not reply but slowly stands up.

PERPETUA

Are you lost? I cannot see your face, my child. Please come out of the shadows.

DINOCRATES puts his hands to his face and shakes his head. He quickly points to the fountain before covering his face again.

The fountain is situated against the wall in the center of the room between them.

PERPETUA

Are you thirsty?

DINOCRATES removes his hands from his face and nods.

PERPETUA

If you come into the light, I can lift you up to the fountain, so you may drink.

DINOCRATES continues to stand in place.

PERPETUA rises from the floor and approaches DINOCRATES. As she gets closer, she recognizes him. Her expression suddenly registers familiarity, joy, and astonishment.

PERPETUA

Dinocrates!

PERPETUA'S expression changes to sorrow.

What appear to be lesions on the child's face can faintly be discerned.

DINOCRATES slowly enters into the light. His face is covered with skin cancers, yet his expression is joyful.

PERPETUA steps forward and crouches down in front of him.

PERPETUA

Oh, Dinocrates, my poor darling, how I wished for those sores to heal, and that your sufferings would end. I had not found the true faith yet, so I could not pray for you. Had I prayed, perhaps, God might have spared you.

DINOCRATES smiles, shrugs, and looks down at the floor. The two touch hands.

PERPETUA

I have thought - I don't know why - but I have thought of you in my recent troubles. I have been worn out with anxiety, for you were never baptized in God's grace, you know.

DINOCRATES, still smiling, tilts his head towards the light and closes his eyes.

PERPETUA

It has been a terrible sorrow for me. You were such a lovely child, and I have fretted over your soul ever since. Perhaps there is a place in Paradise for you, but how can I know such things?

DINOCRATES looks aside at the fountain.

The lip of the fountain is higher than the child can reach.

PERPETUA lifts him up into her arms and carries him over to the fountain. She holds him so that he may bend and drink.

PERPETUA smiles as DINOCRATES sips from the water's surface.

PERPETUA

I will pray for you, Dinocrates, each and every day
. . . until I join you.

PERPETUA glances up, squinting into the light.

INT. PRISON CELL - CARTHAGE - NIGHT

Bright stars are visible through the window in PERPETUA'S prison cell.

PERPETUA looks up at the stars, blinking and looking foggy and confused. She remains seated as before, on the floor against the wall.

PERPETUA reaches aside for the water pitcher and finds it in the darkness near her side. She picks it up and takes a sip of water. She then leans back, cradles the pitcher in her hands, and gazes up at the stars.

The stars glimmer in the firmament.

Fade out.

INT. COMMUNAL PRISON AREA - CARTHAGE - DAY

PERPETUA and her fellow catechumens settle down for a communal agape feast. They sit cross-legged on the floor around a bare area containing various eating and drinking vessels. PERPETUA sits next to SATURUS. They pass around bread, water, and some small scraps of meat, overseen by the guards.

PERPETUA smiles at SATURUS as he hands her a dish and addresses him in a low voice.

PERPETUA

Brother Saturus, may I have conference with you alone, upon the conclusion of the agape feast?

SATURUS pauses and then smiles with a slight nod.

SATURUS

Of course.

PERPETUA takes bread from the dish and passes it on, smiling at SATURUS.

PERPETUA

Thank you.

They continue eating.

INT. COMMUNAL PRISON AREA - CARTHAGE - DAY

After the conclusion of the meal, PERPETUA moves to a corner away from the others. SATURUS joins her. They speak in hushed tones.

SATURUS

Sister Perpetua, of what do you wish to speak?

PERPETUA

Uh, let me see, uh . . . I am uncertain how to explain this, but . . . I had an extraordinary experience last night.

SATURUS

Pray continue.

PERPETUA

Prior to our arrest, you spoke of the many ways God speaks to us - in visions, for instance.

The other catechumens, pacing in another part of the communal area, walk with their heads bowed in prayer or meditation, but a few glance over at PERPETUA and SATURUS with curiosity.

SATURUS

You believe you had such a vision.

PERPETUA

Yes.

SATURUS

What did you see?

PERPETUA

Dinocrates.

SATURUS

That - was your brother?

PERPETUA

Yes. He died when he was seven from a horrible disease of the flesh. His face was so eaten out by cancer that his visage caused repugnance to all men. The doctors were powerless to heal him. He died without the grace of God.

SATURUS

This has caused you some consternation.

PERPETUA

It has been upon my mind.

SATURUS pauses and reflects for a moment.

SATURUS

God's ways are a great mystery. He speaks to us by many different channels. But it is our part to reason his will. I hope God would not forsake Dinocrates, but I cannot know such things with certainty.

PERPETUA

Nor I; but I have found the Lord's kindnesses to be great.

PERPETUA nods her head with decisiveness.

PERPETUA

I must pray for Dinocrates in earnest.

SATURUS addresses PERPETUA as if in benediction.

SATURUS

Perpetua, you are already in a position of great dignity, and are such that you may receive visions.

SATURUS smiles fraternally at her.

SATURUS

You are privileged to converse with the Lord.

PERPETUA beams at him.

Fade out.

INT. PRISON CELL - CARTHAGE - DAY

PERPETUA paces back and forth in her prison cell, illuminated by a dusty light from the high window. PERPETUA paces with her hands behind her back and is murmuring to herself, though her words are not audible.

Suddenly the door opens and the WARDER admits a young man in his late teens. This is PERPETUA'S BROTHER.

The WARDER closes the door as PERPETUA and her brother embrace.

PERPETUA'S BROTHER

Sister, it is good to see your face.

PERPETUA

Dearest brother, I am overjoyed by your company. Upon the incident with father, I feared I'd see none of you again.

PERPETUA'S BROTHER pauses with a look of sympathy.

PERPETUA'S BROTHER

Father - chose not to come with us.

PERPETUA

His absence is a source of great consolation to me.

PERPETUA'S BROTHER gazes around them at the prison cell.

PERPETUA'S BROTHER

Actually we have the generosity of the deacon Pomponius to thank for this visit. He has paid the prison authorities a gratuity so they may permit certain privileges to the prisoners.

PERPETUA

Gratuity?

PERPETUA'S BROTHER shrugs his shoulders.

PERPETUA closes her eyes and nods.

PERPETUA

I understand.

PERPETUA'S BROTHER

Apparently, they believe we might still convince you to make obeisance to the gods.

PERPETUA'S BROTHER smiles and comes up close to her with a hushed voice.

PERPETUA'S BROTHER

But we both know that cannot be.

PERPETUA sighs with a smile.

PERPETUA

I am relieved.

There is a moment's pause.

PERPETUA'S BROTHER

Our mother is here. She has brought your child.

PERPETUA looks with joyful expectancy towards the door.

PERPETUA'S BROTHER

The deacon's gift will allow the child to stay with you for a period.

PERPETUA

Oh . . . that is good.

PERPETUA'S BROTHER grins and motions for her to stay. He knocks on the door. The WARDER opens it and PERPETUA'S BROTHER exits momentarily.

PERPETUA stands gazing at the door, fidgeting in expectation.

The door opens and PERPETUA'S MOTHER enters, followed by PERPETUA'S BROTHER. Her mother carries a baby wrapped in blankets.

PERPETUA reaches out gently for the infant as her mother hands it to her and takes her child into her arms.

PERPETUA'S MOTHER touches the side of PERPETUA'S face.

PERPETUA smiles and nods at her, but with a touch of impatience.

PERPETUA'S MOTHER smiles, somewhat distractedly, looks down at the floor, turns, and leaves, followed by PERPETUA'S BROTHER, who guides her out.

The WARDER shuts the door.

PERPETUA carries her baby over to the corner where she has created a pile of straw against the wall, near where her pitcher of water is also situated. PERPETUA alights onto the straw and coddles her baby.

PERPETUA loosens her garment and brings her baby up to suckle.

PERPETUA cradles her nursing baby in her arms. The light from the window is orange with the oncoming dusk.

PERPETUA

You have made my dungeon a palace.

Fade out.

EXT. A THICK WOODED AREA OR FOREST - DAY

The sky is overcast. A light rain falls. Mist and fog filter through the tree branches.

SATURUS and PERPETUA are ascending a ladder that scales a large steep hill in the forest. A dark low-lying cloud obscures the top of the hill. SATURUS is ahead of PERPETUA, at the mid-point of the ladder. PERPETUA is nearer to the bottom. The sides of the ladder are affixed with various daggers, hooks, lances, short swords, and other iron weapons. Discordant bird-like sounds rattle through the air.

SATURUS and PERPETUA slowly climb the ladder, holding tight to the rungs, carefully avoiding the various implements. Their faces, clothing, and hair are wet with rain and sweat.

SATURUS calls down to PERPETUA, but maintains his focus on climbing.

SATURUS

Take heed you are not careless, Perpetua, lest your flesh cleave to the ironmongery.

PERPETUA

Take care yourself, Satorus. Look upwards and fret not for my sake. I would not see you torn to pieces on my account.

PERPETUA glances up and notices that SATURUS has stopped on the ladder.

PERPETUA

What is it, Satorus?

SATURUS

There is a serpent beneath the ladder.

In a niche or crevice in the hill, a large Egyptian cobra lies coiled, its head raised and its hood expanded, directly beneath the rungs of the ladder, inches from SATURUS' face.

SATURUS stares at the cobra through the rungs.

The cobra stares back, poised, its tongue flickering.

PERPETUA gazes up at the frozen form of SATURUS, waiting, fearful.

SATURUS

The unclean spirit wishes to dissuade us from our ascension. We must stay true to the path.

SATURUS glances up and then slowly, meticulously, continues his ascent.

PERPETUA remains stationary below and watches as SATURUS climbs until he vanishes into the vaporous, misty cloud overhead.

PERPETUA continues to gaze upwards at the cloud.

SATURUS' voice beckons from within the cloud.

SATURUS (o-s)

Perpetua?

PERPETUA continues to gaze upwards, her mouth trembling.

SATURUS

Perpetua, I am here at the summit. Perpetua?

PERPETUA

I am here, Satorus.

SATURUS (o-s)

Perpetua, I await you.

PERPETUA

I am coming, Satorus.

PERPETUA continues to gaze upwards, but now with a determined expression.

Slowly and methodically, she resumes climbing, always gazing upwards. Occasionally one of the iron implements tears at her garments.

SATURUS (o-s)

Take care, sister, that the serpent does not bite you.

PERPETUA continues to focus on her effort, but a change in her demeanor takes effect and a look of exuberance comes to her face.

PERPETUA

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, he will not hurt me.

PERPETUA pauses in her climb as she comes face to face with the cobra through the rungs in the ladder.

The snake gazes back, its tongue flickering.

PERPETUA addresses her words to the animal.

PERPETUA

No, you will not hurt me. I will make this journey in defiance of you. Should you put your head forward to me I would tread upon it.

The cobra flicks its tongue at her.

PERPETUA glances upward.

The swirling, dark, misty cloud obscures the summit.

PERPETUA

Refuge lies above the clouds.

PERPETUA closes her eyes and touches her forehead to her sleeve.

PERPETUA

A place where I can find peace in the grace of God.

The cobra regards her.

PERPETUA raises her head and speaks in a loud, declarative voice.

PERPETUA

The light of truth resides within me. It will guide me forward.

PERPETUA opens her eyes and gazes one last time with transcendence and joy upon the cobra.

PERPETUA

This is to be my passion.

The cobra, coiled, its hood expanded, hisses at her.

PERPETUA resumes her climb, slowly and methodically as before.

PERPETUA disappears into the dark, misty cloud overhead.

Fade out.

EXT. GRASSY HILL - DAY

The day is bright with sunshine. A light wind is blowing.

PERPETUA is climbing a grassy hill. Behind her at the bottom of the hill is a lush green forest.

Once she reaches the crest of the hill, PERPETUA arrives at a wide green meadow.

In the midst of the meadow is a white-haired SHEPHERD amongst a flock of sheep. He is kneeling and milking one of the sheep.

As PERPETUA approaches him, the SHEPHERD pauses and turns to look up at her. He smiles warmly at her, squinting in the sunlight.

SHEPHERD

Welcome, Perpetua.

The SHEPHERD has been squeezing milk from the sheep into a small bowl. The SHEPHERD offers PERPETUA the bowl.

PERPETUA takes the bowl in hand, smiles graciously, and nods her head.

The SHEPHERD resumes milking the sheep.

PERPETUA, her hands cradling the bowl of milk, looks about her at the wide meadow and the surrounding forest.

Large, white, sunlit cumulus clouds move slowly across the sky.

Suddenly PERPETUA turns and her face brightens with excitement and elation.

DINOCRATES runs towards her from across the meadow. As he comes closer, we see that DINOCRATES' face is clear and free of disease.

PERPETUA sets the bowl down in the grass, and kneels to embrace DINOCRATES. She looks upon him with joy.

PERPETUA

I have known his kindnesses to be great.

DINOCRATES smiles angelically in the sunlight.

PERPETUA looks upon the face of her brother, and touches his cheek.

PERPETUA

We are free now, Dinocrates. Our troubles have fled. I knew that if I prayed earnestly enough, God would not let you languish in the place of punishment.

PERPETUA takes up the bowl of milk and offers it to DINOCRATES.

DINOCRATES takes the bowl and drinks from it.

PERPETUA

I was joyous in the flesh.

PERPETUA nods her head in acceptance.

PERPETUA

I am more joyous here.

DINOCRATES hands the bowl back to PERPETUA. He turns, runs, and rolls a short way down the hill. He then stands and does a pirouette.

PERPETUA laughs and smiles tenderly at him.

DINOCRATES runs away in happiness to play.

PERPETUA, with the bowl of milk in hand, alights onto the grass at the top of the hill. The gentle wind stirs the folds of her garment.

PERPETUA drinks from the bowl of milk, and gazes at it for a moment.

PERPETUA then looks up at the clouds over the trees, and takes comfort in the environment that surrounds her.

PERPETUA

I am more joyous here.

PERPETUA once more looks down at the milk inside the bowl.

INT. PRISON CELL - CARTHAGE - DAWN

The light of dawn dimly illuminates PERPETUA'S prison cell.

PERPETUA realizes her hands are empty and begins to feel around the floor. She finds the blanket that swaddled her baby, but the infant is no longer there. She takes the blanket in hand, holds it up to her face, and then holds it close to her breast, her head down, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor of her prison cell.

Fade out.

INT. CORRIDOR, THE OFFICIAL QUARTERS OF THE PROCURATOR -
CARTHAGE - DAY

Armed guards lead PERPETUA, SATURUS, and the other catechumens down a corridor. They walk silently, eyes forward.

PERPETUA walks side-by-side with SATURUS and addresses him in a whisper.

PERPETUA

God spoke to me again.

SATURUS turns his head slightly towards her. His replies are in whispers.

SATURUS

What did you see?

PERPETUA

You and I ascended a great ladder, passed a coiled serpent, and on through the clouds. I saw a vast meadow, where a shepherd welcomed me as if into the bosom of the Lord.

SATURUS

Praise God!

One of the guards glances back at them and scowls.

PERPETUA and SATURUS pause for a moment, and then resume their conversation in whispers.

PERPETUA

I also saw Dinocrates. He was there, and he had been healed as if by grace. I think my prayers were successful.

SATURUS

Amen.

They continue walking. PERPETUA is thoughtful for a moment.

PERPETUA

As I understand this vision, this is to be our passion.

SATURUS is quiet for a moment.

SATURUS

Henceforth we have no more hope in this world.

An expression of stoic acceptance graces PERPETUA'S face.

INT. JUDICIAL CHAMBERS, THE OFFICIAL QUARTERS OF THE PROCURATOR
- CARTHAGE - DAY

The brightly colored bust of Septimius glares with an almost cartoonish malevolence.

HILARIANUS sits at his desk with an elbow propped up, his hand cradling his head. A fatigued expression is on his face, as if he has not slept in days.

On either side of the room stand an assortment of men, women, and children. Situated near the center of the room is a long wooden dais, about five feet from HILARIANUS' desk.

The guards open the doors and usher in SATURUS, PERPETUA, and the other catechumens.

The catechumens pause momentarily and stare with stunned expressions at the people assembled on both sides.

SATURUS murmurs to PERPETUA.

SATURUS

They brought our families. Artful devils, aren't they?

HIALRIANUS addresses the prisoners imperially.

HILARIANUS

Approach!

Prodded by the guards, the prisoners walk towards the dais, glancing aside at their families.

The families gaze back in fearful silence.

PERPETUA sees her MOTHER, BROTHER, and FATHER off to one side. Her MOTHER cradles PERPETUA'S child in her arms.

PERPETUA looks at her family in trepidation.

PERPETUA'S family stares back, her MOTHER and BROTHER with affection, her FATHER with fear. The baby appears to be sleeping.

The guards instruct the catechumens to mount the dais.

PERPETUA is now third from HILARIANUS' right. She glances over at the window that looked out into the garden.

A screen now blocks the window.

HILARIANUS, looking haggard but with a tired smile, addresses them in a conciliatory tone.

HILARIANUS

My friends, fellow citizens: tomorrow is a great day, for it is the birthday of our exalted emperor's son,

His Excellency the noble Geta. Tomorrow, in Rome, he is to be raised to the purple, to stand alongside his brother, the most noble Caracalla.

The catechumens stand on the dais, with discomfited, confused looks on their faces.

HILARIANUS

This is an immense occasion. All of the empire will celebrate with games and exhibitions. We are privileged to witness the ascension of not one but two Caesars in our lifetime. This is to the glory of the true gods - to the glory of the Roman world.

HILARIANUS closes his eyes momentarily, as if in prayer.

The prisoners wait and glance at each other awkwardly.

HILARIANUS opens his eyes.

HILARIANUS

In the spirit of this great event, I have been instructed to offer you one final opportunity to save yourselves from being scourged and sent to the beasts in the arena. Your families have been invited here to share in your new-found faith in our true gods, in your new-found loyalty to our great and noble emperor and his family.

HILARIANUS glances over at the bust of Septimius in exhausted fealty.

The prisoners look back and aside at their families.

PERPETUA glances back hesitantly at her FATHER.

PERPETUA'S FATHER nods at her with an encouraging smile. Her MOTHER and BROTHER now look fearful.

HILARIANUS turns his gaze to REVOCATUS on his far right. His tone of voice now becomes authoritative.

HILARIANUS

Do you swear allegiance to the true gods?

REVOCATUS smiles sadly.

REVOCATUS

As a slave, I have no family, except those with whom I reside in the grace of God.

HILARIANUS once again closes his eyes and rubs his forehead.

The other catechumens smile at REVOCATUS with affection and camaraderie.

HILARIANUS opens his eyes and turns to SATURUS, who stands next to PERPETUA.

HILARIANUS

Do you swear allegiance to the true gods?

SATURUS grins happily.

SATURUS

No.

HILARIANUS smiles sardonically at SATURUS.

HILARIANUS

And yet you are the one, who baptized your fellow prisoners in this false theology; the one who has led them to their fate.

SATURUS continues to smile, undeterred.

SATURUS

Tomorrow is not enough for you, for you to behold with pleasure that which you hate. Friends today, enemies tomorrow. Yet note our faces diligently, that you may recognize them on that day of judgment.

HILARIANUS replies with a tired gaze, and then turns to PERPETUA.

HILARIANUS

And you, the dreamer of gardens -

HILARIANUS gestures in the direction of the now concealed window.

HILARIANUS

- do you stand before your father, mother, your child and declare your allegiance to the true gods?

PERPETUA pauses, and then opens her mouth as if to speak, but is interrupted by her FATHER.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

Daughter, heed the words of the procurator. He is wise and just. He will forgive you. Come home to your family.

PERPETUA closes her eyes in frustration and turns an exasperated gaze upon her FATHER as he approaches the dais.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

Spare the gray hairs of your father. Do not make us a bane to our community. In the name of the gods, think of your child.

PERPETUA'S FATHER turns and grabs the baby from PERPETUA'S MOTHER'S arms and raises it up to PERPETUA. The baby, now awakened, begins to cry. PERPETUA'S FATHER begins crying as well, wailing over the baby's screams.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

Have pity on your babe!

The catechumens begin to fidget uncomfortably.

PERPETUA gazes with anguish at her FATHER and child.

HILARIANUS addresses PERPETUA in a raised voice, in an attempt to be heard over the baby's crying.

HILARIANUS

Spare the infancy of your boy, offer sacrifice for the well-being of the emperor.

PERPETUA still gazes at her FATHER and child in anguish.

PERPETUA

I will not do so.

PERPETUA'S FATHER utters a curse. PERPETUA'S MOTHER grabs the baby, which is still crying, away from her husband.

PERPETUA'S FATHER climbs up onto the dais, jostling the others and taking PERPETUA by the arm. PERPETUA turns away from him.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

No! I will not let you go to die in the arena! I forbid it! I will not let you!

HILARIANUS stands and addresses PERPETUA'S FATHER.

HILARIANUS

Enough! That will do!

PERPETUA'S FATHER ignores HILARIANUS and almost succeeds in pulling PERPETUA down off the dais, all the while haranguing her.

HILARIANUS addresses the guards.

HILARIANUS

Remove him! I cannot allow this disruption!

Two guards approach and tear PERPETUA'S FATHER away from PERPETUA.

As they pull PERPETUA'S FATHER down off the dais, he stumbles and falls onto the floor. The guards attempt to pick him up but he begins to fight and jostle with them. The guards beat him with rods. He yells out in pain and sobbing.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

No! - we are good people! - don't let her do this -

PERPETUA looks on with helplessness at the spectacle.

PERPETUA makes a slight gesture with her hand, as if reaching out to help her father.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

You can't take her! - Perpetua!

HILARIANUS addresses the guards.

HILARIANUS

Don't beat him, remove him! Take him out!

The guards cease beating him and once more attempt to get him to his feet, but he refuses. The guards drag him clumsily across the floor as he continues to scream in sobs and fits.

PERPETUA'S FATHER

She swears allegiance - please! - spare her! - spare her! - Perpetua!

The guards remove him from the chamber.

As his screams and protests continue from down the hall, HILARIANUS gazes with a harsh, accusing stare at PERPETUA.

PERPETUA replies with a stoic look of sadness.

HILARIANUS suddenly turns an icy stare at the bust of Septimius.

Septimius stares back, glaring, unmovable. All the while PERPETUA'S baby continues to cry.

HILARIANUS turns to the remaining catechumens and shouts at them.

HILARIANUS

Well?

SECUNDULUS, FELICITAS, and SATURNINUS turn their gaze to the floor.

HILARIANUS gestures to the other guards to remove all of the families.

The families all turn to leave, but gaze back at the catechumens.

The catechumens respond with looks of affectionate parting.

PERPETUA gazes at her MOTHER, BROTHER, and child.

The child is now calm, as PERPETUA'S family leaves, looking back at her with stunned, smiling faces.

When all of the family members have departed, HILARIANUS stands and addresses the prisoners.

HILARIANUS

With the power given to me as procurator of this province, I hereby order you to be taken to the prison camp of the arena and held in fetters until tomorrow, when you will fight the wild beasts in the exhibition. May the gods be merciful.

The catechumens hold themselves up with dignity and smile beatifically.

Cut to black.

INT. CORRIDOR, ARENA PRISON CAMP - CARTHAGE - DUSK

PERPETUA and the catechumens are lined up against a grayish concrete wall. Each is fitted with manacles at their wrists by the guards.

SATURUS addresses the guard who is affixing his manacles.

SATURUS

We have not yet had our meal today. When may we be refreshed?

The guard glances up at him with a frown, and then moves on to PERPETUA.

PERPETUA addresses the guard.

PERPETUA

Why do you not at least permit us to be refreshed, being as we are objectionable to the most noble Caesar, and having to fight on his birthday? Or is it not to your glory if we are brought forward fatter on that occasion?

The guard glances up at PERPETUA with a frown, and then moves on to FELICITAS.

PERPETUA and SATURUS put their heads back against the wall with fatigue, as vague, intermittent sounds of voices in anguish and pain echo in the distance. PERPETUA and SATURUS gaze silently and broodingly ahead into space.

Fade out.

INT. PRISON CELL - CARTHAGE - DAY

PERPETUA finds herself back in her old cell, seated on the floor, without her manacles. A strange orange light illuminates the room, emanating from the overhead window.

It is daytime but overcast, the gray clouds tinted with orange as they roll across the sky. Faint discordant atonal music echoes from afar.

The door to the cell is wide open. A distant figure emerges from darkness at the end of a long straight corridor with an arched ceiling. The figure walks quickly towards the cell.

PERPETUA stands up in apprehension.

After a long wait, the figure arrives at the cell and stops in the doorway. He is tall, thin, and sallow, balding, and wearing a richly ornamented white robe. This is POMPONIUS, the deacon.

PERPETUA and POMPONIUS stare at each other in silence for a moment. PERPETUA breathes heavily.

POMPONIUS

It is time, Perpetua. I have come to take you to battle.

PERPETUA

I am ready, Pomponius.

POMPONIUS

They are waiting, Perpetua. We musn't disappoint them.

PERPETUA

I understand.

POMPONIUS offers PERPETUA his hand.

POMPONIUS

Come - I will lead you to the place of combat.

PERPETUA takes POMPONIUS' hand.

PERPETUA

Thank you, Pomponius.

Holding each other's outstretched hands, the two look at each other a moment. POMPONIUS suddenly turns and leads PERPETUA from the cell.

INT. CORRIDOR - DAY

POMPONIUS drags PERPETUA along by the hand and leads her down a long tight roofless corridor with stone walls.

The sky remains dark with threatening clouds. The faint discordant atonal music continues to be audible in the background.

The corridor goes on for a long distance.

POMPONIUS walks quickly, and PERPETUA occasionally stumbles to keep up.

INT. STONE STAIRWAY - DAY

POMPONIUS leads PERPETUA down a steep cramped winding stone stairway, lit from somewhere above.

INT. TUNNEL - TIME OF DAY UNKNOWN

POMPONIUS leads PERPETUA through a dark tunnel. POMPONIUS carries a lantern. His expression is fixed and determined, and continues to pull PERPETUA along by the hand.

INT. CAVE - DAY

POMPONIUS leads PERPETUA from the darkness of a large cave towards the cave's exit. The light from without the cave is a bright aura. The discordant atonal music now grows louder. POMPONIUS no longer carries the lantern.

EXT. NATURAL AMPHITHEATER - DAY

POMPONIUS and PERPETUA emerge from the cave into a crater or natural amphitheater.

The rim and slopes of the crater are peopled with numerous spectators in various states of excited behavior.

High overhead, rolling dark overcast clouds move fast across the sky, creating shifting light patterns. The discordant atonal music is now at a deafening volume.

PERPETUA looks up in an agitated state at the audience.

Spectators gesture and grimace at her with heightened menace and derision.

PERPETUA then notices a lone man standing in the center of the crater, gazing back at her with patient expectancy. He is wearing a loose tunic and a purple robe between two bands over the middle of the breast, as well as "manifold calliculae" (bronze discs) of varied form, made of gold and silver. He carries in one hand a wooden rod and in the other hand a green branch upon which are golden apples. This is the LANISTA, or gladiatorial trainer.

POMPONIUS comes up close to PERPETUA and speaks in her ear over the din of the spectators and the music.

POMPONIUS

Do not fear, I am here with you, and I am laboring with you.

Agitated and somewhat confused, PERPETUA nods her head in reply.

POMPONIUS leads her over to the LANISTA.

The LANISTA regards PERPETUA with a slightly amused smile.

LANISTA

Are you ready to do battle . . . gladiator?

PERPETUA

I am not a gladiator, yet I am ready to do battle with whatever the devil may put before me.

The LANISTA now gives her a knowing smile, turns, and points the wooden rod at a far corner of the crater, darkened by the shadows of the overcast day. The dissonant atonal music stops, replaced in the underscoring by ominous ambient atonal growling and white noise.

Barely discernible in the shadow is a tall, slim, but taut and muscular black man with startlingly bright, almost glowing eyes. This is the EGYPTIAN. He wears nothing but a loin cloth and leather straps and sandals.

PERPETUA gazes into the darkness at the EGYPTIAN.

The EGYPTIAN emerges from the shadows, followed by two diminutive attendants, who carry his weapons: a short sword and a spear. The EGYPTIAN saunters slowly and assuredly over to the center of the crater, glaring and smiling with intimidation at PERPETUA.

POMPONIUS murmurs in PERPETUA'S ear.

POMPONIUS

That is your adversary, sister-in-Christ.

PERPETUA

Then I am not to be served to the wild beasts?

POMPONIUS

Your struggle is with the devil, my dear.

The EGYPTIAN and his attendants come to halt a few meters away from PERPETUA.

The LANISTA stands between them and raises the wooden rod.

The audience is immediately cowed into silence.

The LANISTA points the wooden rod at the EGYPTIAN and addresses all assembled in a loud voice.

LANISTA

This Egyptian, if he should overcome this woman -

The LANISTA turns and points the rod at PERPETUA.

LANISTA

- shall kill her with the sword; and if she shall conquer him, she shall receive this branch.

The LANISTA holds the branch with the golden apples aloft.

LANISTA

Upon this branch are apples of gold, the branch of peace, with which she may proceed through the Sanavivarian Gate, where clemency is granted to the victor.

PERPETUA looks with uneasiness at the EGYPTIAN.

The EGYPTIAN glares at PERPETUA with supernaturally glowing eyes and a smile of smug confidence.

PERPETUA nods at the LANISTA.

POMPONIUS quickly and meticulously removes PERPETUA'S outer garment, beneath which she is surprised to find herself wearing a gladiator's tunic and sandals, with a large brown studded leather belt at her waist.

POMPONIUS hands PERPETUA a short sword and a spear. She looks at the weapons in her hands in perplexity.

Meanwhile attendants wipe down the EGYPTIAN with oil, but he never averts his gaze from PERPETUA. The attendants hand the EGYPTIAN his weapons and depart from the field.

POMPONIUS mutters in PERPETUA'S ear.

POMPONIUS

God be with you!

POMPONIUS quickly removes himself from the field, leaving PERPETUA to face the EGYPTIAN.

PERPETUA awkwardly, but defiantly, holds her weapons in hand.

LANISTA

Let the contest begin!

The spectators let out an intense roar.

The LANISTA ostentatiously removes himself from the field, leaving PERPETUA and the EGYPTIAN to face one another in combat. Heavy thundering drums and tambourines, Eastern drones, and strange choirs fill the underscoring, intermixed with the din of the spectators.

PERPETUA is focused and anxious.

The EGYPTIAN continues to leer at her with smug, deadly confidence.

The two begin circling each other, with short sword in one hand and spear in the other. PERPETUA takes a defensive posture but is diminutive in comparison to the stature of the EGYPTIAN.

The EGYPTIAN strikes at her with the short sword.

PERPETUA repels his blow but maintains a defensive posture.

The EGYPTIAN comes at her several more times with short sword and again she successfully repels the blows. This begins to instill greater confidence in PERPETUA.

As they continue to circle each other, PERPETUA comes at the EGYPTIAN with both sword and spear, but the EGYPTIAN easily repels her attack.

PERPETUA falls back and then comes at him again.

Again, the EGYPTIAN casts PERPETUA'S spear and sword aside.

PERPETUA once more falls back, but now the EGYPTIAN comes towards her and with greater reach. He makes a sweeping attack from the side with his arm and knocks the short sword from PERPETUA'S hand.

PERPETUA'S sword goes flying off to the side and lands several meters away, sticking up out of the dirt with the handle uppermost.

PERPETUA makes a move towards it but the EGYPTIAN hurriedly comes around and blocks her way.

PERPETUA stands with only her spear, facing the EGYPTIAN, who stands between her and her sword. They begin circling one another again, as PERPETUA tries to outflank him to gain access to the sword.

The EGYPTIAN continues to block her way until PERPETUA makes a desperate move towards her sword.

The EGYPTIAN comes at her.

PERPETUA holds her spear with both hands in front of her body, using two quick jabs with the spear to repel his weapons.

There is a change in the demeanor of the EGYPTIAN as he comes at her again -- he grows angrier and more frustrated.

PERPETUA repels the EGYPTIAN'S attacks and, emboldened with a sense of increased urgency and purpose, begins to go on the offensive.

It is at this moment that PERPETUA somehow starts to rise into the air as she avoids the EGYPTIAN'S attacks. The source of her

levitation is unknown, but it enables her to back up and away from the blows.

When she lands, PERPETUA and the EGYPTIAN stand a few meters apart.

Reeling on the offensive, PERPETUA runs and leaps into the air, her legs pumping and her arms jabbing with her spear.

The EGYPTIAN backs away from PERPETUA as she comes at him.

When PERPETUA reaches the EGYPTIAN, she strikes his arm with her spear, dislodging his sword, which goes flying out of reach.

The EGYPTIAN pulls up his spear with both hands, and the two begin battling with spears.

As PERPETUA flies through the air, a look of exultation comes over her and she starts to laugh, coming down hard with the shaft of her weapon.

PERPETUA splits the EGYPTIAN'S spear in half.

The EGYPTIAN gazes up at her through all of this with stunned incomprehension, his mouth gaping.

Sunlight breaks through the clouds and the strange choirs become exhortatory.

PERPETUA, floating upon the air and looking down upon the EGYPTIAN with a look more of blissful joy than triumph, throws away her spear.

The two stare at each other a moment, the EGYPTIAN in shock, PERPETUA laughing joyfully in euphoria.

PERPETUA twines her fingers, grabs ahold of the EGYPTIAN'S head, and pulls him face-down onto the ground, at the same time coming down to earth herself.

PERPETUA stands and places her foot upon the EGYPTIAN'S head.

The EGYPTIAN lies upon his stomach, his face turned to the side with an empty expression as if he were dead.

PERPETUA, panting and sweating, gazes up and around at the spectators with a kind of transported ecstasy.

The spectators cheer and sing. The drums and choirs cease.

POMPONIUS approaches PERPETUA from behind and gently pulls her away from the EGYPTIAN, who continues to lie motionless upon the ground.

PERPETUA does not acknowledge POMPONIUS, but continues to look upon the EGYPTIAN as if she were in a laughing, blissful trance.

When the LANISTA approaches them, PERPETUA finally looks up.

The LANISTA holds up his arms and the audience grows quiet.

LANISTA

The triumph is complete!

The audience erupts in cheer.

PERPETUA laughs like a child in the sunlight.

The LANISTA hands PERPETUA the branch with the golden apples.

POMPONIUS releases PERPETUA as she takes the branch in hand.

LANISTA

Peace be with you, daughter. Go gloriously to the Gate.

PERPETUA looks back at POMPONIUS.

POMPONIUS nods and smiles at PERPETUA.

PERPETUA turns to look towards the Gate.

INT. COMMUNAL PRISON CELL, ARENA PRISON CAMP - CARTHAGE - DAY

Dusty sunlight emanates through a thin recessed window in a stone wall. The only sound is that of vague, intermittent crowds cheering in the distance.

PERPETUA, manacled and in her normal prison gown, sits on the floor, leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the cell. She stares at the light coming through the window, which creates a bright slit across her face.

PERPETUA stands and moves slowly across the prison cell, her bare feet moving softly over the straw-covered floor. SATURUS and the other catechumens are scattered around the darkened cell. They are awake but silent, and look at PERPETUA as she moves trance-like towards the window.

The window is at a height just above her head. PERPETUA reaches up as if to cup the sunlight in her hand.

The others gaze at her with tired but distracted, curious stares.

PERPETUA then turns her hands palms out at the light.

The shadow of her hand crosses PERPETUA'S face. PERPETUA stares with fixed determination at her hand.

PERPETUA'S hand glows almost transparently in the sunlight.

PERPETUA suddenly turns her head, as the cell door is unlocked.

The cell door opens and HILARIANUS and two armed guards enter the room.

SATURUS and the other catechumens stand.

PERPETUA remains frozen at the window, staring fixedly at HILARIANUS and the guards.

HILARIANUS, with sagging eyelids and disheveled hair, gazes in silence at the prisoners. He glances curiously at PERPETUA.

PERPETUA remains at the window with her hands over the light.

HILARIANUS addresses the group in a voice cracked with fatigue.

HILARIANUS

Do any of you swear allegiance to the true gods?

The prisoners respond with blank stares. They all appear weak and exhausted.

HILARIANUS' shoulders sag and he turns to address the guards.

HILARIANUS

Bring them out.

SATURUS

May we pray first?

HILARIANUS sighs heavily and rubs his cheek.

HILARIANUS

Yes. Quickly.

SATURUS and his catechumens assemble in a circle, hold hands, and bow their heads. Meanwhile HILARIANUS addresses the guards off-screen.

HILARIANUS (o-s)

When they've finished, bring them out.

HILARIANUS exits the chamber.

Before commencing the prayer, SATURUS glances over at PERPETUA.

PERPETUA remains standing at the window.

SATURUS says nothing to her, but bows his head and invokes the brief prayer.

SATURUS

Glory unto our Lord Jesus Christ, whom we magnify, and honor, and adore, and let the new virtues testify that the Holy Spirit is always operating, and God the Father Omnipotent, and His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, whose is the glory and infinite power for ever and ever. Amen.

The catechumens murmur "Amen."

While SATURUS invokes the prayer, PERPETUA gazes once more at the light glimmering through her hand.

INT. CORRIDOR TO THE ARENA - CARTHAGE - DAY

HILARIANUS is outside in the corridor, facing away from the cell, and leaning against a wall with fatigue. Two other guards are with him, their swords drawn.

The two guards within the cell begin bringing the prisoners out. SATURUS is in front, with SATURNINUS and PERPETUA directly behind him.

HILARIANUS turns his head to the side, wipes his mouth, and then steps forward, silently motioning to the guards to bring them along.

With HILARIANUS in front, the guards bring the six prisoners along in a tight pack, with two guards in front and two in back.

The air is hot and bad, and the entire group is sweating. All of the prisoners show neither panic nor elation, but a kind of stunned expectation as the pace accelerates.

Up ahead an opening in the roof shows a patch of sunlight in the corridor. The sound of cheering crowds grows closer and louder.

As the group passes through the open-air section of the corridor, the prisoners look up.

Various gawkers look down and jeer at them as they pass.

PERPETUA looks up.

One of the men spits on PERPETUA.

PERPETUA turns away as the spit lands in her matted hair.

A moment later, HILARIANUS and the prisoners return to another roofed section of the corridor.

HILARIANUS and the guards continue to escort the prisoners along as the crowd sounds grow even closer and nearer.

In a few moments, the group rounds a corner and HILARIANUS brings them to a halt. This section is wider and slopes upward toward the arched entrance to the arena; two more guards stand on either side of the entrance brandishing their short swords. The crowd cheers are now an ebbing and flowing tide of white noise emanating from the entrance. Nothing of the arena is visible because of the brightness of the sunlight outside and the slope of the corridor.

HILARIANUS motions for them to wait and goes out through the entrance into the arena.

The group continues to stand waiting, panting heavily in the heat.

Next to the group, to the prisoners' right, stands another guard, carrying in both arms a stack of robes of two different colors, with distinct symbols sewn onto the sleeves and neck of each garment.

The prisoners glance furtively and nervously at this guard and the garments he carries.

The guard stares back, blankly.

The wait for HILARIANUS continues.

HILARIANUS returns and walks down the ramp.

HILARIANUS addresses the guard escort in front of the prisoners, while motioning to the guard with the robes in his arms.

HILARIANUS

The men are to be garbed in the robes of Saturn, the women in the robes of Ceres.

The prisoners begin to protest vociferously and forcefully. PERPETUA addresses HILARIANUS in desperation.

PERPETUA

We have come thus far of our own accord, that our liberty might not be restrained. For this reason, we have yielded our lives, that we might not do any such thing as this.

HILARIANUS stares back at her in silence. There is a moment of quiet expectation, augmented by the sound of the crowds outside.

HILARIANUS addresses the front guard escort, motioning to SATURUS and SATURNINUS, who are next to each other in front.

HILARIANUS

Leave the robes! Bring the two men!

The guards take SATURUS and SATURNINUS roughly by their arms and drag them up the ramp. As the guards lead them away, SATURUS addresses HILARIANUS over his shoulder.

SATURUS

You have seen fit to judge us. But God will judge you!

SATURUS and SATURNINUS are led out into the arena, the entrance guards saluting them with their swords as they pass. As the prisoners disappear into the arena, a sudden roar from the audience outside bursts forth.

PERPETUA gazes in transcendence at the arc of light that is the gate to the arena, not unlike her expression when gazing at the clouds.

The guard escort returns and comes down the ramp.

HILARIANUS motions to PERPETUA.

HILARIANUS

The woman next!

The guards take PERPETUA by the arms and begin to lead her to the entrance.

As the guards lead her away, PERPETUA addresses her fellow catechumens over her shoulder.

PERPETUA

Stand fast in the faith. And love one another, all of you!

The entrance guards salute.

Suddenly PERPETUA and the escort guard come to a halt at the entrance, the escort guards letting go of her arms. Ethereal, elegiac music slowly fades up in the underscoring.

PERPETUA turns and addresses the camera, the light behind her forming a halo.

PERPETUA

And be not offended by my sufferings.

PERPETUA, with an expression of finality and acceptance, slowly turns and, of her own accord, enters out into the arena.

Cross-fade into the next scene.

EXT. A HILLSIDE FACING A VALLEY - CARTHAGE - DAY

The previous scene cross-fades into a quick POV shot from underwater of the sun flickering through the ripples.

Cross-fade into sunlit cumulus clouds, floating languorously from across a blue sky. The underscoring continues to fade out slowly.

Cross-fade into an image of PERPETUA, seen from behind, seated on a hill on the opposite side of the valley, her arms folded around her knees, watching the clouds move across the sky.

Cross-fade into the next scene.

EXT. HOT SPRINGS - BITHYNIA PROVINCE - DAY

The previous scene is ultimately obscured by gradually cross-fading into steam moving in the same direction across the plane of vision.

Cross-fade into faint steam floating gently over hot spring pools in a sylvan glade. The pools are set in terraced limestone formations white with calcium deposits, surrounded by trees, sand, and flora. A small waterfall trickles down into the uppermost pool. The scene is surmounted by tall limestone rock formations in the background. The title **Theodora** appears in the bottom left corner of the frame.

Cross-fade into a delegation of local dignitaries emerging from wisps of steam. Three officials are out in front. They stop and stare off-screen in nervous expectation.

In the distance, a large entourage of carriages, horses, and runners comes down the road towards the glade. An otherworldly musical fanfare with a propulsive rhythm of drums accompanies the progress of the entourage in the underscoring.

The road cuts through the forest; the local citizenry line the forest slopes and edges of the road, cheering the arrival of the empress and her retinue, throwing laurels and flowers to the entourage.

The principal carriage in the entourage is gilded, surmounted by a purple canopy, and drawn by eight white Arabian horses.

A petite woman of Near Eastern complexion in her late twenties sits within the gilded carriage. She is garbed in an elaborate gown covered in jewels and precious stones. She stares straight ahead with a relaxed yet confident and patrician gaze. This is THEODORA.

Seated opposite THEODORA is a young man with a bowled haircut and another woman in her mid-forties. Both are garbed in court dress of similar ostentation to THEODORA'S. The man is CALOTYCHIUS, the official chamberlain and chief eunuch. The woman is THEODORA'S close confidant and friend ANTONINA. Both CALOTYCHIUS and ANTONINA have their heads outside the canopy, gazing with delight and enjoyment at the reception from the crowds.

THEODORA glances at ANTONIA and CALOTYCHIUS with a slightly bemused expression.

Sunlight beams filter through the trees of the forest as the retinue progresses towards its destination.

The crowds along the slopes on one side of the road and along the water's edge on the opposite side are dappled in sunlight and shadows from the trees. Many stretch out their arms as if to touch the empress as she passes.

Children begin to run alongside the empress' carriage, where they narrowly escape being trampled by the horses and the imperial runners.

The children laugh and wave to CALOTYCHIUS and ANTONINA.

CALOTYCHIUS and ANTONINA laugh and wave back.

THEODORA discreetly pushes the canopy aside to observe the children.

The children laugh and wave to THEODORA.

THEODORA replies with a smile and a nod.

The children begin to fall back as the horses pick up their pace.

The underscoring slows as the retinue comes to a halt at the edge of the glade.

The delegation waits in heightened expectation.

CALOTYCHIUS and ANTONINA alight from the carriage. They, along with the runners and other nearby staff, stoop to one knee and bow as THEODORA emerges, glittering, into the morning sun.

CALOTYCHIUS and ANTONINA rise and accompany THEODORA as she approaches the delegation.

The three officials at the head of the delegation step forward. The LOCAL DIGNITARY in the center of the three addresses THEODORA in a voice slightly overawed.

LOCAL DIGNITARY

Your majesty Theodora, Mother of Byzantium, empress of the world -- welcome to Thermae Pythia.

THEODORA nods politely.

In one complete movement, the entire delegation falls upon its knees, and then prostrates itself upon the ground.

THEODORA looks down upon her subjects with the same relaxed, polite smile.

The delegation remains face down in the dirt and sand.

THEODORA turns her gaze forward, with an expression of quiet but absolute power. The music ebbs.

Cut to white.

Title card:

BITHYNIA, A.D. 529

EXT. HOT SPRINGS - BITHYNIA PROVINCE - DAY

Two ladies-in-waiting are playing a hydraulis organ in the uppermost pool. One performs on the keyboard while the other kneels in the pool, pumping water from the nearby waterfall through the instrument. The sound of the instrument, similar to a calliope, echoes through the glade, reverberating off the limestone.

Armed guards stand at every few paces all around the circumference of the hot springs.

Tents and canopies are set up on the grounds surrounding the pools. Several horses are tethered to trees nearby.

All of the women in this scene, including the organ players, are garbed in cloths wrapped around their breasts and loins (in the

manner of the mosaics in the Villa Romana del Casale). The men all wear a similar cloth around their loins but their chests are bare.

THEODORA and her immediate retinue of courtiers and hangers-on, numbering about two dozen, including CALOTYCHIUS and ANTONINA, arrive at the edge of the lower pool. CALOTYCHIUS, garbed like the other men, behaves awkwardly, and carries a stylus and scroll.

THEODORA, at the head of her retinue, steps forward into the pool. Light steam drifts over the surface of the water.

THEODORA bends her knees and fetches two handfuls of water. She straightens her body with her hands held out to the sides, and allows the water to trickle through her fingers.

THEODORA closes her eyes and breathes in sensuously and languorously.

THEODORA opens her eyes, and turns to look at her entourage.

The entourage is still standing timidly at the water's edge.

THEODORA turns back around with an amused smirk and addresses her entourage over her shoulder.

THEODORA

Come along, dears. Don't be shy.

The entourage begins hesitantly to step into the pool.

Cross-fade into the next scene.

EXT. HOT SPRINGS - BITHYNIA PROVINCE - DAY

Members of THEODORA'S entourage relax in the terraced pools or along the water's edge.

THEODORA reclines on an outcrop of limestone rock, near the waterfall and the organ players, gazing down at the bathers.

ANTONINA sits just below, reclining in the water against the rock face. A young handsome man of Syrian cast sits astride her, massaging her shoulders and arms from behind. ANTONINA murmurs to THEODORA, in a state of bliss.

ANTONINA

These waters are pools of pure delight.

THEODORA

I warned you, Antonina - one soak and you will be vexed. You may lose yourself.

ANTONINA

I should hope so.

ANTONINA turns to her friend, while the masseuse continues his ministrations.

ANTONINA

But, Basilissa, you mustn't tarry upon the rock. Remember -- it is these waters which will bring forth the emperor's son.

THEODORA, leaning on one elbow, smiles wistfully.

THEODORA

Perhaps.

THEODORA rises onto her haunches and slowly crab-walks into the water. The organ tones echo through the glade like a syrinx.

THEODORA sidles over next to ANTONINA, who meanwhile has reached her hands up and is caressing the young man's pectoral muscles.

THEODORA looks with amusement at her friend.

THEODORA

Enjoying your toys, my dear?

ANTONINA heaves a contented sigh.

ANTONINA

Immensely.

THEODORA

If Belisarius could see you now . . .

ANTONINA

The good general would allow his wife her pleasures.

THEODORA

He is a good general.

ANTONINA

That he is.

THEODORA repositions herself in front of ANTONINA.

THEODORA

I, however, may not permit myself such . . .
recreation. My - influence with the emperor is based
upon that celibacy.

THEODORA leans back in the shallow pool and gazes upwards.

THEODORA

But I have had enough of a life of the flesh.

THEODORA gazes down at her belly.

THEODORA

If it wasn't for the existence of my little girl, I
would consider myself barren. I suppose, then, my
inability to bring forth a son for Justinian must
remain a mystery for now.

THEODORA leans forward and becomes thoughtful.

THEODORA

But I have been cast for a higher purpose, than mere
progeny and temporal alliances. It is my charge to
reform this world, and with Justinian by my side, this
work can be accomplished. I was not dragged through
the sewers of the empire only to find myself an
ornament to power, and nothing more.

THEODORA closes her eyes and affects an expression of quiet
intensity.

THEODORA

So . . . if I cannot bring forth a son, I will bring
forth a new world.

THEODORA opens her eyes and gazes contemplatively at ANTONINA
and her lover.

THEODORA

But where to begin . . .

ANTONINA pauses in thought for a moment and then brightens.

ANTONINA
Why not begin with your daughter?

THEODORA slowly smiles.

THEODORA
Calotychius!

CALOTYCHIUS, who is sitting on the bank with his feet in the water, awkwardly stands up and wades over to the edge of the pool. He carries his stylus and writing material.

CALOTYCHIUS
Yes, your highness?

THEODORA gazes upwards in thought.

CALOTYCHIUS waits patiently.

THEODORA
I would like to write a law - for Justinian to decree.

CALOTYCHIUS readies his stylus.

THEODORA
Henceforth mothers shall have full guardianship rights over their children.

CALOTYCHIUS writes it down.

THEODORA
And daughters shall receive the full share of their inheritance.

CALOTYCHIUS writes it down.

THEODORA continues to gaze upward in thought.

CALOTYCHIUS waits.

THEODORA
I would like to write another law - for Justinian to decree.

CALOTYCHIUS readies his stylus.

THEODORA

Henceforth all children born from female slaves - will
be born free.

CALOTYCHIUS writes it down.

THEODORA pauses a moment.

THEODORA

That will be all -

THEODORA and ANTONINA share a smile.

THEODORA

- for the present.

CALOTYCHIUS bows and wanders off.

THEODORA throws her head back. Her long black hair dangles in
the water. She closes her eyes and breathes in the air, while
steam floats languidly over the surface of the waters.

Fade out.

EXT. FOREST PATH - BITHYNIA PROVINCE - DAY

The late morning sun threads through the trees of the forest.

Along a rough-hewn path, armed guards are escorting THEODORA and
ANTONINA as they go for a recreational walk. Both women are
still attired in their bathing outfits. The guards are muscular
and bare-chested, and carry short swords. Two guards are in
front and two are behind the women, giving the impression that
THEODORA and ANTONINA are more prisoners than royalty. THEODORA
walks slightly ahead of ANTONINA, and wears a sun hat.

THEODORA and ANTONIA both wear laced sandals that tread the sod
of the path underneath.

Birdsong comes down from the trees. As they walk, THEODORA
listens and points upwards.

THEODORA

Heed the piping of the birdsong.

ANTONINA

We are well accompanied, Basilissa.

THEODORA

I cannot remember when last I was permitted to enjoy the idylls of nature. The palace is a cage. I am grateful Justinian agreed to build me a villa in this remote district. I may now leave the cage at my leisure.

ANTONINA

And I am grateful you condescended to invite me, Basilissa. I find the palace stifling as well, with Belisarius always away on campaign.

THEODORA

He is a good general.

ANTONINA

That he is.

THEODORA looks back playfully over her shoulder at ANTONINA.

THEODORA

And I would not dream of leaving you behind, my dear. We are flightless birds of a feather.

ANTONINA bows her head.

ANTONINA

As always, Basilissa, I am humbled by your friendship.

THEODORA glances off to her right, into the distance.

THEODORA

I reward loyalty with as much devotion as I punish disloyalty.

An awkward pause follows this declaration.

The two women continue to walk in silence for a while, the forest quiet save for the tread of their sandals and the guards' boots, and the birdsong.

THEODORA glances with a coquettish smirk at the guard to her left. He holds his sword to his chest and bows his head.

THEODORA, still smirking, gives him a quick look-over and then turns her head back to the path ahead.

THEODORA

Antonina dearest, have I ever told you of the time I walked all the way from Libya to Alexandria?

ANTONINA

I don't believe you have.

THEODORA

Quite rightly. It was a shameful period of my life. But lately I find myself meditating upon that period; and I have come to the knowledge that if it weren't for that journey, I would not be who I am today.

EXT. DESERT ROAD - DAY

Flashback: Seen from a distance, THEODORA trudges painfully on bare feet along a desert road, the heat creating mirage around her.

THEODORA (v-o)

After taking his pleasure from me for three years, the bastard Hecebolus banished me from Libya Pentapolis, where he had bought himself a governorship, the swine. All provincial governors are swine.

THEODORA'S clothes are of silk and fine linen, yet hang upon her body in tatters. Her hair is unkempt, besides an obvious effort at trying to contain it. Her face, though powdered and clean, is thin and sallow, yet her eyes contain a fiery gaze dead-set on the road ahead. Though she walks in obvious pain, THEODORA still carries herself with an air of dignity and haughtiness.

THEODORA (v-o)

I was sent into the desert with nothing more than the elegant clothes on my back. By the time I reached the outskirts of Alexandria, more than eighteen months later, they were in shreds; and yet I would not have dreamt of trading them for a peasant's tunic.

Sores, filth, and blisters cover THEODORA'S feet.

EXT. DESERT RUINS - DUSK

Flashback: As the sun sets, the full moon glimmers in the darkening deep-blue sky.

THEODORA arduously climbs over rocks and boulders towards a conglomeration of ruined buildings situated on a series of hills.

THEODORA (v-o)

Hecebolus had hoped that I would vanish into the desert, like dust. But that pathetic creature never sought to understand me. He did not consider my prodigious talent for survival. I had suffered the worst degradations known to woman; and yet here I was -- still alive, and on my feet.

THEODORA makes a place for herself within a covered area of the ruins and begins to nibble on dates.

THEODORA (v-o)

As the sun set one evening, I sought shelter in a ruined fort. It was cold; wolves were about. I nestled in the ruins, and fed on dates.

After her meal, THEODORA applies powder to her face from a small receptacle.

THEODORA (v-o)

Despite all of these privations, I would never allow my beauty to fade; for in those days, it was all the currency I had.

THEODORA lies down on the hard ground and looks out at the last vestiges of the sunset with a look of both bitterness and determination. Faint Eastern modal tones echo in the underscoring.

Fade out.

40. EXT. DESERT RUINS - NIGHT

Flashback: Fade in. The full moon illuminates the ruins.

THEODORA awakes to find a thin old man in rags leaning over her, staring into her face. This is THOMAS, the hermit.

THEODORA reflexively pushes herself away from him.

THOMAS

The ruins are full of snakes.

THEODORA addresses THOMAS in a fearful but commanding voice.

THEODORA

Who are you?

THOMAS

My name is Thomas. I live in a cave just over that hill. I can give you shelter from the cold.

THEODORA

And how shall I - repay such hospitality?

THOMAS smiles in an almost fatherly manner.

THOMAS

My quarters may not be luxurious, but I do not charge rent.

THEODORA rises slowly to her feet, but still regards THOMAS with uncertainty.

THEODORA

Very well.

THEODORA follows THOMAS, with his bent stoop, into the hills, surrounded by moonlight and shadows.

Fade out.

INT/EXT. A CAVE AND AN OUTCROP OF ROCK - MORNING

Flashback: The new morning sun shines into a cave where THEODORA lies sleeping.

THEODORA slowly opens her eyes and shields them from the light. She raises herself on one elbow. On the ground by her side, she notices a small clay bowl filled with fresh water.

THOMAS sits on a rock just outside the cave. He is deep in prayer.

THEODORA sits up and the slight noise she makes jars THOMAS out of his prayers.

THEODORA appears groggy and confused, but still speaks in a commanding tone.

THEODORA

What day is it? How long have I slept?

THOMAS looks down at her from the rock with a beatific smile.

THOMAS

Why, it's Sunday, the Lord's day.

THOMAS motions to the bowl.

THOMAS

Refresh yourself.

THEODORA looks down at the bowl, glances back up at THOMAS, and then drinks copiously from it.

THOMAS

I do not permit myself many indulgences. But on his day, God desires us to be refreshed. Water and bread, in divinity's grace.

After draining the bowl, THEODORA scans their surroundings.

THEODORA

Why do you live out here in this wilderness?

THOMAS smiles at her with pride.

THOMAS

I hide amongst the caves and the fossil ruins, for I have . . . misbehaved.

THEODORA

From whom do you hide?

THOMAS glances off into the distance.

THOMAS

Our aged emperor Justin - and his demon enforcer.

THEODORA

What have you done to offend the emperor?

THOMAS continues to gaze into the distance. His voice takes on an ethereal air.

THOMAS

I choose to follow the true faith. I believe in the singular divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. We of the true faith do not follow the false orthodox Creed - as our emperor and his demon enforcer do - that Jesus was both divine *and* human. No, that is a sacrilege. The Lamb of God is manifest in one single aspect of divine splendor.

THOMAS turns to THEODORA in a worldly manner.

THOMAS

But the pope believes differently, and the papacy must preserve its power. And so we of the true faith are sent forth into the desert, lest we suffer the scourges of the demon enforcer.

THEODORA gazes at THOMAS in fascination.

THEODORA

What are you?

THOMAS

I am a Monophysite. I am a heretic. I am an enemy of the state.

THEODORA continues to gaze at THOMAS in fascination, reverence and awe, but also with empathy.

THEODORA (v-o)

This tottering hermit who had given me shelter from the darkness was a fellow exile, thrown to the wolves by unforgiving fools and bitter despots.

The morning sun illuminates THOMAS' face.

THEODORA (v-o)

We, who did not benefit the princes of this world, were cast aside to wither away into oblivion. Yet, like me, Thomas had other plans.

EXT. AN OUTCROP OF ROCK - DAY

Flashback: THEODORA and THOMAS sit cross-legged across from one another, atop a large rock overlooking the desert hills. Both have their eyes closed and their arms out with their palms facing up.

THEODORA (v-o)

From that moment forward, I was a devout Monophysite, a convert to the true faith -- me, the infamous courtesan of the hippodrome. But Thomas would ferry me along the lighted path, and in his gentle instruction a higher mission presented itself to me.

EXT. A PATH LEADING THROUGH THE RUINED FORT - DAWN

Flashback: From behind, THEODORA guides THOMAS through the ruins into the desert sunrise, the breeze ruffling their ragged garments.

THEODORA (v-o)

When, later, Thomas ventured forth into the desert to prepare for the next stage of his journey, I made passage back to Constantinople - to defend my new-found brethren against the emperor's demon enforcer.

EXT. FOREST PATH - BITHYNIA PROVINCE - DAY

THEODORA and ANTONINA continue their walk through the forest.

ANTONINA

And who exactly was this demon enforcer?

THEODORA

My husband Justinian

ANTONINA

And is the emperor a demon?

THEODORA looks back with a playful smirk at ANTONINA.

THEODORA

In some ways.

THEODORA turns back to face the path ahead.

THEODORA

But now my brethren are safe.

THEODORA'S face brightens as they approach CALOTYCHIUS.

CALOTYCHIUS stands waiting for them along the edge of the path. Attendants stand nearby with horses tethered to trees. CALOTYCHIUS is wearing his tunic.

THEODORA

Ah, here we have our excellent chamberlain Calotychius. And he appears to have traded in his bathing garment.

THEODORA approaches and halts before them.

CALOTYCHIUS and the other attendants fall to their hands and knees.

THEODORA regards CALOTYCHIUS with amusement as he and the other attendants rise.

CALOTYCHIUS

Forgive me, your highness. My flesh was becoming like a wrinkled prune.

THEODORA

You are forgiven. In fact, you are just the fellow I wanted to see.

CALOTYCHIUS

I am attendant, your highness.

THEODORA

Indeed you are.

THEODORA clasps her hands together.

THEODORA

I am feeling inspired today. I would like to write a law - for Justinian to decree.

CALOTYCHIUS takes up his stylus.

THEODORA

We are going to ban prostitution throughout Byzantium. No more will women be offered as commerce to the worst species of manhood. All the brothels in Constantinople will be closed up. The women will be relocated to a

convent where they may support themselves. The convent will be called - Metanoia.

CALOTYCHIUS writes it down.

When CALOTYCHIUS is finished, THEODORA sends him away with a flick of her fingers.

CALOTYCHIUS bows and wanders off.

THEODORA turns to ANTONINA.

THEODORA

Come along, Antonina. Let us go forth undaunted into our new world.

Holding hands aloft, THEODORA and ANTONINA proceed forward out of frame left, followed by their guards.

EXT. LIMESTONE ROCK - BITHYNIA PROVINCE - DUSK

The western sky is pink and purple.

THEODORA lies upon a limestone rock that overlooks the hot springs. She is supported by soft cushions of eiderdown and remains garbed in her bathing outfit. She lies upon her back, one leg arched, her head turned toward the west, as she gazes transfixed at the darkening sky. Vague Eastern modal tones resume in the underscoring. Near THEODORA stand armed guards.

CALOTYCHIUS approaches and falls to his knees in her presence.

CALOTYCHIUS

Your highness . . . It is time for your supper with the bishop and the governor.

THEODORA continues to regard the sunset almost as if in trance. She speaks as if under hypnosis.

THEODORA

So soon?

CALOTYCHIUS remains on his knees.

CALOTYCHIUS

Yes, your highness.

THEODORA props herself up onto one arm.

THEODORA

What a day this has been.

CALOTYCHIUS

A very good day to be sure, your highness.

THEODORA

I feel invincible, chamberlain. I feel as though I could wrestle wild beasts, like the martyrs of yore.

CALOTYCHIUS

You are no martyr, your highness. You are the empress.

THEODORA

And yet, I am a heretic. How could a heretic become empress of Byzantium?

CALOTYCHIUS

Your great good fortune, your highness.

THEODORA sits up and pulls her knees up close with her arms, and continues to gaze into the sunset.

THEODORA

I could wrestle a thousand lions, draw lightning from the sun. There is no limit to what I can accomplish.

CALOTYCHIUS

Your highness - the supper

THEODORA looks down, smiles wryly, nods to herself, and then stands up.

CALOTYCHIUS rises as well.

THEODORA addresses CALOTYCHIUS and the guards.

THEODORA

The affairs of state intrude on us like ghosts. Come along, dears - time to escort me home.

THEODORA, seen from behind, walks slowly towards the pink and purple sunset, followed by CALOTYCHIUS and the guards. Faint Eastern tones continue in the underscoring. As she walks, THEODORA reaches her arms up to the sky and stretches.

Fade out.

EXT. CHURCH ATRIUM - BITHYNIA PROVINCE - DAY

THEODORA walks along a path leading up to the entrance of a small cathedral. An armed escort and a small entourage of local officials and monks accompany her. Foremost in the entourage is the BISHOP of the local diocese on the empress' right. On her left, the Master of the "Sacred Largess", who carries in both arms a large ornate wooden box.

THEODORA is garbed extravagantly in the manner of her mosaic in the church of San Vitale. Upon her head is an elaborate crown with jewels and strings of pearls that hang down from the sides to her upper chest.

The weather is pleasant. Birds sing softly in the trees and there is a light wind.

The procession marches silently and solemnly towards the entrance to the church.

BISHOP

God has seen fit to bless this day of your visit with glorious sunshine, your majesty.

THEODORA

Mmm-hmm.

THEODORA is slightly distracted by something unseen, which she fondles in the fingers of her right hand. The BISHOP notices this.

BISHOP

May I be so bold as to ask your majesty the item you carry in hand which commands your attention?

THEODORA holds up a worn and aged coin.

THEODORA

It's a coin, many centuries old. One of our eunuchs unearthed it near the baths yesterday. It was brought to my attention this morning.

BISHOP

May I see it, your majesty?

THEODORA nonchalantly tosses the coin to the BISHOP.

They stop at the entrance to the church as the BISHOP examines the coin, turning it over in his hand. The others wait patiently.

BISHOP

Oh my, yes, this is quite old; as you say, your majesty, several hundred years old.

The BISHOP holds it up close to his eyes.

BISHOP

It is royal coinage - the Greek inscription is still legible. One side reads . . . King Aristobulus.

The BISHOP turns the coin over and scrutinizes it closely.

BISHOP

The obverse reads . . . Queen Salome.

The BISHOP looks up at THEODORA in surprise. THEODORA smiles placidly.

THEODORA

Yes, I know.

THEODORA takes the coin back from the BISHOP.

The BISHOP straightens himself and adjusts his cassock.

BISHOP

Would that be Salome, daughter of Herod?

THEODORA peruses the coin.

THEODORA

Undoubtedly. My resident historian and chamberlain has confirmed that the daughter of Herod, called Salome by Josephus, became queen of Armenia under Nero.

The BISHOP affects an air of solemnity.

BISHOP

A fine reward for the murder of he who anointed our Lord.

THEODORA

Now-now, your grace, it was not she who wielded the
axe.

BISHOP

The Gospels teach us that it was Salome who desired
John the Baptist's head; that she danced for Herod;
and he, out of lust for her, fulfilled her wish.

THEODORA pauses and looks at the BISHOP with a placid smirk.

THEODORA

She must have been a marvelous dancer.

The BISHOP now affects an air of contrition.

THEODORA gestures towards the interior of the church.

They proceed inside.

INT. CHURCH VESTIBULE - BITHYNIA PROVINCE - DAY

THEODORA, the BISHOP, and the others enter the vestibule. Dusty
sunlight emanates through windows overlooking the vestibule and
nave.

THEODORA'S entourage crowds in behind her.

THEODORA motions to the Master of the "Sacred Largess" to
approach with the box, and addresses the BISHOP in a rehearsed,
formal manner.

THEODORA

Your grace, we of the royal purple would like to make
a gift to your church.

BISHOP

We are overwhelmed by your generosity, your majesty.

THEODORA smiles and makes a gesture to the Master of the "Sacred
Largess".

The Master of the "Sacred Largess" opens the lid of the box.

The BISHOP glances in expectation at THEODORA and then peers inside the box. His eyes widen and he looks back at the empress in grinning fealty.

BISHOP

Such magnanimity, your majesty!

The BISHOP falls to his knees. THEODORA raises him back up.

THEODORA

No, no, your grace, please. We of the royal house of Byzantium appreciate your efforts on behalf of our Lord and Savior.

The BISHOP rises to his feet and grins like a schoolboy.

THEODORA

I am curious though: what are your views on accepting donations from heretics?

The BISHOP is taken aback and unable to speak for a moment.

BISHOP

I beg your pardon, majesty?

THEODORA

This is an orthodox church, is it not?

BISHOP

Yes?

THEODORA

Well, I am a heretic - a Monophysite. I adhere to the true faith, your grace, in defiance of the false orthodox Creed - the true faith, that our Lord Jesus Christ is of a single divine substance.

A heavy, silent, and deeply uncomfortable pause settles on the entire assembly.

THEODORA

Is my donation still accepted?

The BISHOP is momentarily uncertain how to respond.

BISHOP

Of course, your majesty!

THEODORA

I am relieved. I was distressed that my gift might be rejected by an unreasonable prejudice.

BISHOP

Impossible! The empress of Byzantium could never be a heretic.

THEODORA

You're very kind; nevertheless, by ecumenical decree, I am a heretic. I was simply curious as to your feelings on the subject.

The BISHOP pauses and smiles, but with a look of increasing terror in his eyes.

BISHOP

Your majesty, I assure you my views in this matter are of the last importance. Your -- heresy, as you call it, is a matter for my superiors at the Holy See in Rome. But I am certain they would never think to question the faith of the empress of the world.

THEODORA leans into the BISHOP, who reflexively backs away.

THEODORA

Nonsense. We both know the pope is the "Great Beast" John warned us about in Revelation.

The BISHOP bursts out in a sputtering of nervous laughter.

BISHOP

Oh, your majesty -

THEODORA turns away from the BISHOP and closes the box.

When THEODORA'S back is to him, the BISHOP suddenly and hastily crosses himself with a look of panic on his face.

INT. CHURCH NAVE - BITHYNIA PROVINCE - DAY

Dusty, late afternoon sunbeams filter through the tall windows overlooking the nave.

THEODORA wanders along, perusing the art and architecture of the building. Faint muted plainchant echoes from afar.

THEODORA strolls along slowly, followed at a discreet distance by the BISHOP and a lady-in-waiting.

THEODORA moves as if in dreamy contemplation of the Byzantine edifice.

THEODORA comes to a mosaic in a rear corner of the church, partly in sunlight, partly in shadow. It depicts an African woman gazing blissfully at the observer, her head surmounted by a halo. Behind her is the outline of a Roman amphitheater. Under the mosaic is the word PERPETVA. The mosaic appears to be unfinished.

THEODORA turns to the BISHOP.

THEODORA

Your grace, what is this?

The BISHOP comes forward and stands just over THEODORA'S shoulder.

BISHOP

A wonderful addition to our house, your majesty: the work of a local artisan. It is a depiction of Saint Perpetua, upon the occasion of her martyrdom in the arena.

THEODORA gazes upon the mosaic in silence for a moment.

THEODORA

It is beautiful.

BISHOP

Alas, it is not finished, your majesty. I regret the artist was unable to complete his work in time to honor your visit.

THEODORA

It should remain unfinished. Her life was unfinished.

BISHOP

As your majesty wishes.

THEODORA steps closer to the mosaic.

THEODORA

Ah, we women. What difficult creatures we are. So seldom do we meet the needs of others. Our lives are fragments of stone and glass, arranged by unseen hands. We are pieces of work. And if the light shines upon us, it is met by shadow.

The mute eyes of the mosaic stare back.

THEODORA holds her head up with a defiant smile and addresses the mosaic.

THEODORA

But we stand aloft and proud, do we not, sister? Let the hands of others endeavor to sculpt us; I won't serve their purposes. I've lived too long to be unfinished.

The mosaic of PERPETUA answers in shadowed silence.

THEODORA turns to address the BISHOP.

THEODORA

No, let the artist complete his work. He might regard my suggestion as a criticism.

The BISHOP bows his head.

THEODORA turns away from the mosaic.

The mosaic is gradually engulfed in shadow.

Fade out.

INT. CHURCH VESTIBULE - BITHYNIA PROVINCE - DAY

ANTONINA and CALOTYCHIUS enter the church, gazing with amusement at the assembly milling about.

THEODORA approaches the group.

All fall to their knees.

ANTONINA and CALOTYCHIUS rise, along with the others.

THEODORA regards her friends with a placid smile.

CALOTYCHIUS

It is time, your highness. Your retinue awaits your pleasure.

THEODORA turns to ANTONINA.

THEODORA

We have such brief moments of peace in the garden, do we not, dearest?

ANTONINA

I suspect we shall find our way back here in summers to come, Basilissa.

THEODORA

Indeed.

THEODORA turns to the BISHOP.

THEODORA

Your grace, we appreciate your generous hospitality.

The BISHOP bows his head.

BISHOP

Your majesty has honored us with your presence.

THEODORA nods and turns back to her friends.

THEODORA

So . . . where do we go from here?

ANTONIA and CALOTYCHIUS wait with expectant smiles.

THEODORA'S face grows contemplative.

THEODORA turns and looks back at the mosaic of PERPETUA.

The mosaic gazes back from the shadows. The closing theme music - a solemn, delicate melody on guitar - begins in the underscoring.

THEODORA smiles sadly and turns back to face her friends.

THEODORA looks down at the coin of SALOME, still held in her palm.

With a brighter, more hopeful smile, THEODORA flips the coin into the air.

The coin's ascent and descent are followed slowly through the air.

EXT. ANCIENT RUINS - DAY

Flash-forward: A fresco of THEODORA, dressed in her ceremonial costume, covers a fragment of ruined wall. Several feet in front of it and to the left another fragment of wall is revealed, covered in a fresco of PERPETUA. Several feet in front of it and to the right a third fragment of wall is revealed, covered in a fresco of SALOME. All three are surrounded by broken columns, stone foundations, and other ruins of antiquity. The ruins are situated on a small hill surrounded by trees.

The camera continues to track backwards until a group of teenagers in modern clothes is revealed, situated on various parts of the excavation. They are of various genders and ethnicities. They laugh and converse as some of them kick a soccer ball back and forth.

The day is bright with sunshine.

Cut to white and closing credits.

THE END

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