NICHOLAS

by

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SUPER ON BLACK SCREEN:

In the 3rd century A.D., civil wars had ravaged Rome into a state of crisis. Yet upon the ruins of a fallen empire a new faith would rise; and through the darkness a new legend would be born.

The letters mold into FLICKERING FLAMES in an iron brazier. The fire is poked by an indiscernible MAN. Embers swim up.

The firelight whips off stone walls articulating shadows of a FAMILY listening to him speak. He carries a subtle accent from Spain.

MAN FROM SPAIN
For fifty years, Rome was ruled by over 35 emperors. Claim to the throne had fallen to the clutches of the armies. Loyalties were thin, honor was dead. The battle of the Margus brought an end to the civil wars with the reign of Diocletian. But Rome had not yet found its way.

FADE IN TO:

EXT. NORTHERN ROMAN EMPIRE - DAY

WE SOAR over the mighty Danube River along the northern inland frontier of the Roman Empire.

Stretching across lush green HIGHLANDS touched by shafts of sunlight lancing through a veil of CLOUDS... as the river bank slices through an expansive RIFT VALLEY...

Revealing the battlegrounds for a bloody civil war between two ROMAN ARMIES. Fires smolder. Tens of thousands already lie dead.

An eerie silence has pervaded the air as the siege is nearly over, victory is nigh.

A BLUE-EYED SOLDIER is positioned. Broad shoulders. At odds with it all. His neighbor whispers a prayer, he glances over, looks back.

Like the thousands of AUXILIARY TROOPS that surround him, he is caked in mud with an iron helmet fastened.

All eyes fixed on the edge of an Alpine forest, where the battered OPPOSITION holds steady. Both sides awaiting orders.

SUPER: BATTLE OF THE MARGUS - ROME - 285 A.D.

A faint WHISTLE sounds the air on the opposing side. Then... EVERY SOLDIER *raises their shields over their heads.*

Many show a slight sign of relief.

NEIGHBOR SOLDIER
Praise Mars, they've surrendered.

EXT. HILLTOP - DAY

HOOVES pound the grass as a silver rider in Lorica Segmentata armor -- CONSTANTINE (25) -- races uphill to an elite CAVALRY perched at a high hilltop overlooking the rift valley.

The fully accoutred standards and vexillums of the eastern regiments skewer into the air with the gilded Roman EAGLE.

He addresses the General -- DIOCLETIAN.

CONSTANTINE
General... Carinus has surrendered. His prefect agreed to our terms and laid down his sword.

Diocletian regards the storm clouds moving in and howling breeze. A dubious resolve about him.

DIOCLETIAN
The weather can be so fickle in the north. Maximian...

He looks over to his loyal and savage centurion, MAXIMIAN, sitting at least a head taller who's massive frame is devoid of a scratch yet his armor glistens crimson.

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
Send in all the reserves, Jupiter has spoken. I shall reward him with Carinus' head.

CONSTANTINE
But sir...

MAXIMIAN
General.

Maximian signals the regiment as they EXPLODE down the hill.

Diocletian flashes Constantine a reassuring look not bereft of warning -- *do not ever question my judgement again.*

DIOCLETIAN
Come Constantine, let us take back Rome.

Diocletian urges his warhorse forward as Constantine lingers with a disapproving glance.

THUNDER rumbles, raindrops start to fall, and Constantine surveys the heavens analytically...

But maintaining fidelity, he looks back down and SPURS his horse...

THE VALLEY - AUXILIARY LINES

A MOUNTED CENTURION gallops across the auxiliary lines, blows a WHISTLE and to the chagrin of many --

CENTURION
Cohors alaria! Orders are for full attack!

The centurion bats down the muffled complaints with an order -

CENTURION (CONT'D)
Gladium stringe!

A myriad of SWORDS are unsheathed.

RANDOM SOLDIER
Shame to waste what's already been spoiled, I suppose.

The blue-eyed soldier is among the last to begrudgingly draw.

CENTURION
Percute! Percute! Percute!

The ranks fall into a heavy MARCH, it starts to pick up pace, becoming a full blitzkrieg into the unassuming enemy line.

ANOTHER PART OF THE VALLEY

Maximian's cavalry THUNDERS towards the forest line, where a smaller ROMAN BATTALION surrounds their respective General, who's vexillums of the *western* regiments flap in the wind.

The drizzle intensifies, pattering against their raised shields.

But their horses paw the moistening grass nervously as the RUMBLING from the encroaching hooves grows. The soldiers exchange looks, shields wavering...

SOLDIER
General?

GENERAL (CARINUS)
(realizing)
Diocletian does not offer clemency.

A sobering beat. The General accepts it. He unsheathes his sword.

GENERAL (CONT'D)
Men, it was an honor. May the gods save Rome.

Facing imminent death, the soldiers lower their shields and draw steel. Falling into gallop straight ahead...

MAXIMIAN'S CAVALRY rips steel from leather scabbards and push in full-tilt as the two sides COLLIDE!

SMASH! Maximian bulldozes a rider clean off his horse.

The remaining cavalries battle it out. Steel rings on steel. Glinting and clanging. Horses rear up.

AUXILIARY LINES

A ruthless exchange wages as Diocletian's legions slaughter the enemies.

Hacking, slicing, slashing with short swords in a grim display of ancient warfare.

The enemies form a triangular PHALANX as a last stand. Seven-foot SPEARS spike outwards like large thorns.

The WHISTLE sounds the air again --

CENTURION
Phalanx formation! HALT!

The front line DIGS their shields into the ground and DUCK behind it as a WALL forms to hide what's coming to them --

FIRE POTS. The remaining infantry rushes over terra cotta pots with torches and light them.

We land on the blue-eyed soldier, who scoops one up with a *bare hand* and HEAVES it into the phalanx! Pitch SPLASHES over the soldiers! They're set ABLAZE as the formation breaks and SCREAMS fill the air!

The cohort RUSHES IN as he remains on his knee, *frozen*, watching the men burn alive... the conflagration dancing across his eyes...

DIOCLETIAN'S CAVALRY

Maximian's men lay the enemies to waste. Constantine spins his horse and spots an ARCHER behind a tree -- bow creaking, arrow aimed at Diocletian...

He SNAPS out another blade and SLICES it through the air as it CHEWS into the tree --

Causing the archer to *flinch* just enough for the arrow to skirt Diocletian, who whips his head around nearly stunned.

The archer takes off on foot.

Diocletian offers a swift nod to Constantine both in thanks and permission to pursue.

Constantine charges after the rider through the trees... coming up on him, raising his sword...

But KICKING him down instead. He dismounts and pins the soldier behind a tree, sword pointed at his neck. Panting, soaking, both scanning their same Roman armor.

SOLDIER
So this is what it has come to...

Constantine's eyes fight back the embers, breath vaporing.

SOLDIER (CONT'D)
What summons you, soldier?
Donative? Loyalty?

CONSTANTINE
I fight for Rome.

A fleeting grin --

SOLDIER
It will take a miracle to save
Rome. Not an army.

Constantine presses the blade as the soldier closes his eyes... But is unable to do it. He slowly releases the soldier, who opens his eyes surprised.

CONSTANTINE
Go.

The soldier tips a nod in thanks and slips away, leaving Constantine in cogitative silence.

He hears CLAMORS and CHEERS... as he looks up past the tree to Diocletian ostentatiously hoisting up Carinus' HEAD on a stake to the field of soldiers.

AUXILIARY LINES

The cohorts hear the celebration as they CHASE DOWN the fleeing enemies.

Our soldier still remains on his knees under the grim clouds, the abating rain trying to wash off the blood shrouding his armor.

He divests his breast plate and stakes his sword into the mud. His blue eyes gaze west -- where the lands beyond the mountains are awash in golden sun-rays...

The sublime beauty slightly breaching the darkness that's clouded his eyes. He doesn't move, doesn't join the distant commotion, he just stays there...

Searching for solace, for signs... As if beckoning him, like the moment light touches the petals of a bud... as it WASHES OUT the frame...

DISSOLVE TO:

A BUSTLE of Egyptian sailors and local Greek/Roman barterers at the sprawling GRANARY of the ANDRIAKE HARBOR. Filtering in and out of the cells of the granary, to and fro the merchant vessels, people of many varieties and all desperate to strike a deal for food.

SUPER: **MYRA, EASTERN ROME - 15 YEARS LATER**

Storm clouds loom over the Mediterranean further out while NESTLED ATOP A HILL overlooking the harbor is the pagan temple of Artemis.

From beyond the high ridge a *figure in red* appears pulling a mule laden with straw sacks. We push in through the brush to a familiar pair of blue eyes, at more peace than when we first met them... as NICHOLAS stops and surveys the bedlam below.

In his 30s now, with a red liturgical stole cloaked over his broad shoulders indicating his title as the bishop of Myra.

He CLICKS his mouth and the mule follows him down the hill...

SAILOR (V.O.)
Not good enough, preacher...

EXT. GRANARY, ANDRIAKE HARBOR - DAY

A sailor unloads bushels into the granary, denying the trinkets Nicholas has brought in his bags.

SAILOR
Now for *that*, we can work something out --

He's looking at Nicholas' *Ecclesiastical ring*. Nicholas doesn't hesitate to take it off, surprises the sailor.

NICHOLAS
Let us work then.

SAILOR
Four bushels of winter wheat sounds fair. But I was expecting more of a fight.

NICHOLAS
I would rather my village eats. Make it five.

The sailor takes the ring, studies it.

SAILOR
I will drink for an entire month in Rome with this.

NICHOLAS
Then make it six.

SAILOR
Five will do.

They shake on it and exchange. Nicholas loads the bushels onto his mule.

SAILOR (CONT'D)
Have you been to Rome, preacher?

NICHOLAS
No, sailor. The fairest of cities is no place for fair men like me.

SAILOR
Fair men with valuable rings.

NICHOLAS
Ironic world we live in I suppose.

The sailor removes a wine bladder and toasts to that. After guzzling, he offers it to Nicholas who shakes his head.

SAILOR
Where are you manners, preacher? We drink to a successful bargain.

Not wanting to disrupt the exchange, Nicholas takes the wine with his *marred hand.*

NICHOLAS
I sold my ring and now I drink, sounds like Rome is calling.

He gulps one down and grabs the mule's reins --

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
God bless.

And he trots off without fanfare, the sailor watching peculiarly.

SAILOR
I am not a Christian.

NICHOLAS
Neither was I.

EXT. DIRT ROAD, MYRA - DAY

Nicholas pulls his MULE through the dry dirt road winding through the hills, now laden with bushels of grains.

Under the scant shade of a tree lies a frail OLD MAN. Tunic shredded, flesh abraded. Possessing only a water damaged leather SCABBARD.

Nicholas reigns his mule to a halt and carries over a WATER GOURD. He moves the man's arm that's shielding his face and lifts his head, bringing the gourd to his mouth.

The man shudders and drinks with trembling hands. His POV -- Nicholas' silhouette shimmers against the hazy sun.

Water beads roll down his scruffy face. Nicholas caps the gourd and glimpses at the long windy road ahead...

Where two mounted ROMAN GUARDS approach. Nicholas not exactly thrilled at the company.

The guards clip clop past. Watching the scene indifferently.

GUARD
Daily dose of economics, less mouths to feed --

GUARD 2
More for us.

GUARD
Half-wit Christian.

Nicholas lets them ride on and goes to help the man. Then --

GUARD (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Hold on, what do we have here?

Nicholas pauses, hoping to have avoided this. He turns his head... as the guard opens a bushel and sees the grains.

GUARD (CONT'D)
Taxed I presume?

NICHOLAS
A private exchange is not held under taxable decree, sir.

GUARD
Decrees are up for interpretation.

NICHOLAS
As I would be glad to discuss such interpretations with the prefect.

Threatening subtext not lost, the guard unsheathes his sword and trudges over. Pressing the blade against Nicholas' chest.

GUARD
I hear you're quite the barterer, preacher. So here is one for you... Since you people enjoy dying for your cause so much, how about I kill you now and ride all of these grains up to your pigs. Or... I spare your worthless life and take our proper share.

The sword GLEAMS under the peeking sun as Nicholas battles this unseen moral code of martyrdom.

Another HAND grabs at his ankle -- he looks down to the old man strenuously shaking his head.

Nicholas looks back up and complies. The guards gloatingly remove an entire bushel and shamble off.

GUARD (CONT'D)
You may be smarter than the other ones... or more stupid, hard to tell.

Nicholas divests his stole and wraps it around the man, his coarse undergarment tunic revealing trails of his past life.

He lifts the sick man, CLICKS his mouth and the mule falls into tow.

EXT. NICHOLAS' VILLAGE, MYRA - DUSK

Impoverished, bathed in vermillion. Overlooking the town and Mediterranean to the west. Home to a thatched CHURCH with a canopied pavilion, a dry crop field and thin livestock.

NICHOLAS trudges uphill with the remains of his strength, CLERGYMEN run up and take the old man from his arms.

NICHOLAS
Get him bread and water. Have the sisters care for him inside.

An old priest, FATHER AERIUS, approaches. Kind eyes offering a concerned look at the extra mouth needed to be fed.

FATHER AERIUS
The bread supply is nearly depleted, bishop, and with the growing season come and gone...

Nicholas simply RESTS his hands on his shoulders and gestures behind. Father Aerius looks passed his shoulder and sees the bushels, kindled with relief.

EXT. PAVILION, VILLAGE - NIGHT

Braziers crackle with FIRES under the pavilion. Villagers huddle along the dinner tables.

The old man is seated by the nuns. Bandaged, thankful yet abashed. We now notice the Germanic tattoos on his arms.

The bustle quiets as Nicholas takes the floor, clad in his lay-brother brown robe now. Although less regal than his stole, this is a befitting look for him.

NICHOLAS
Rather than saying our traditional grace tonight, I would like to welcome our new guest to our dinner table. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember these simple words, “it is more blessed to give than to receive”.

The weathered faces are breached momentarily by comfort. But the old man keeps his gaze downwards, tentative...

NICHOLAS (CONT’D)
You may speak freely here, brother.

OLD MAN
(Germanic accent)
I am a pagan.

NICHOLAS
Do you think I was not aware when I carried you up here?

He looks up as Nicholas gestures towards the bread, trying to grasp the unusual kindness these strangers are showing him. He takes a LOAF and his gnarled hands BREAK the bread --

INT. PANTHEON, ROME - NIGHT

Moonlight BEAMS through the oculus of the coffered rotunda and onto the STATUE OF JUPITER. This structural marvel is the temple of all gods -- Mars, Vesta, Isis, Apollo...

Hooded PAGAN PRIESTS stand before Jupiter. Draped in the purest white, stoic faces glowing against the braziers. Hands DIPPING into a chalice of blood and raising as an offering.

Behind them is a roman BISHOP on his knees, hands untied, but his eyes glimmering with resignation.

A pagan priest turns towards him revealing an INFANT in his arms. Another carries over the bloody dagger and offers it.

The bishop shows no response. Just mutters --

BISHOP
May God forgive you all.

The look the priests exchange suggests the futility of this request as FOOTFALLS echo from the anterooms.

And from the veil of darkness beyond the colonnades... FOUR MEN appear. THREE of them 15 years older than when we first met them --

Emperor Diocletian, wearing his laurel wreath and elaborately draped in an ostentatious bejeweled robe and shoes -- moving away from the traditional purple toga... This man deifies himself. As the priests kneel and kiss the hem of his robe.

PRIESTS
Dominus noster. (Lord and master)

The years have not been kind to him. A cynical and volatile look looms behind his grandiose facade.

Maximian, chief commander of the Praetorian guard. The massive man is dressed in full armor. Helmet at his side. If not anything else, this brute is a sheer warning to anyone willing to oppose the emperor.

The young legionnaire turned Tribune of the first order -- Constantine. Dressed in a stately white toga, who has aged very well... Physically at least, his eyes are conflicted, stemming from the start of the slow transformation we witnessed in the opening scene.

And COUNCIL MASCIUS. A short corpulent man. The emperor's trusted advisor.

Diocletian looks at the priests, they shake their heads and he slowly circles the bishop.

DIOCLETIAN
Bishop Lucius... understand that I extend only clemency and tolerance to the Christians.

Constantine remembers Diocletian's notion of clemency.

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
Much like any other cult that has come and gone through our city walls. Yet... like these other cults I do expect you to honor Rome's ancient traditions.

The bishop doesn't respond. This frustrates Diocletian. He takes the bloody blade and kneels in front of him.

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
Believe in any god that you want. So as long as you also sacrifice to Rome's gods. That is all I ask.

He holds the blade out, stares at the bishop... Nothing. Diocletian's eyes become a shade darker. Mascius brings him a SCROLL, which grabs the bishop's eye for a moment.

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
Make a sacrifice to me; son of Jupiter, father of Rome, and I may even consider your charter of rights.

Again... nothing. Diocletian SCREAMS inches from his face --

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
Why do you condemn yourself?!

The bishop looks into his eyes, almost cripples him with a few simple words --

BISHOP
Because you are no god.

The coup de grace. Diocletian prepares to thrust the blade --

CONSTANTINE
Sire...
(Diocletian looks up)
Martyrdom is their strongest political weapon... Maybe prison is a more judicious approach.

Maximian glares at Constantine. No love lost here.

DIOCLETIAN
I would rather send a message to the heart of their creed.

CONSTANTINE
You will be sending a recruiting order, nothing else. Let history be a lesson, caesar. When prefect Almachius killed Saint Cecilia, there were four hundred recruits in one day. When Nero killed Saint Paul, there were thousands. They are a hundred thousand strong in our city today, imagine what killing him would do.

MAXIMIAN
You use their titles as if you were one of them.

CONSTANTINE
In politics, sense outweighs the sword. Try and keep up.

Maximian smirks, hand moving over his hilt -- *how about you say that to my sword?*

Diocletian looks over at Mascius.

MASCIUS
(Italian accent)
Tribune Constantine speaks the truth, caesar.

Diocletian rises, casting steely eyes down upon the bishop, not accepting it... not *wanting* to accept it...

DIOCLETIAN
I am the emperor of Rome... Son of Jupiter...

With a hint of reluctance, he SNAPS his fingers and as if on cue -- Maximian steps up, raises his greatsword and SLICE!

Constantine grimaces. THUMP and we hear the *head roll*. Diocletian relishes the moment before vanishing into the DARK HALLS...

And over black, *the sun begins to rise...*

As the whispers of dawn set the horizon outside Rome afire offering the first panoramic glimpse onto the Eternal City. The first to be touched by light are the Seven Hills of Rome... spreading out upon the Servian Wall, the Colosseum, the Field of Mars, and finally the massive Imperial Palace...

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE, DIOCLETIAN'S BEDCHAMBER -- DAWN

The warm light peeks through the shutters and into the posh bedroom, where Diocletian sleeps next to his wife -- PRISCA, who is woken by the SOUNDS of *mobilizing guards*.

She rises and pads over to the balcony, opens the shutters and is taken aback by what she sees --

HUNDREDS of Christians have gathered in the courtyard in a vigil. Gazes cast up at the balustrades. Amongst the front line is a gray-haired PRIEST, whom we will see more of later.

The City Guards form a perimeter. Led by a mounted Maximian.

MAXIMIAN
Guards, unsheathe your swords!

Blades are drawn, gleaming in the morning light.

The PRIEST looks to his people and gives a nod -- as EVERYONE drops to their knees. Prepared to be martyred. Their conviction rattling the guards, creating hesitation.

PRISCA uneasy by the sight, maybe more so by what her husband has done rather than the vigil itself.

PRISCA
Husband...

Diocletian's eyes flutter open, needled with consternation when he sees her. He rises, throws on his robe, and marches over. Doing his best to suppress his anger, he SCREAMS towards the door --

DIOCLETIAN
Mascius!!

A beat, the door is opened as Mascius slides in. Diocletian turns and through gritted teeth --

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
Handle this...

Mascius bows and slides back out...

EXT. IMPERIAL PALACE - PRIVATE COURTYARD - MORNING

Mascius walks with three members of the Christian ecclesiastical assembly -- The priest from the protest, FATHER LIVIUS, and two high deacons -- Brother MARCUS and Brother CASSIUS.

MASCIUS
I speak to you on behalf of the emperor, gentlemen. Reprimands are in order for those responsible for Lucius' death.

MARCUS
And what of a replacement?

MASCIUS
Rest assured a replacement has been arranged.

LIVIUS
Without the acclamation of our clergy?

MASCIUS
There are... formalities that must be considered as this is a delicate matter.

CASSIUS
Then let us discuss it with the emperor. Surely he may be amenable to our charter at this *delicate* time.

MASCIUS
The emperor will only speak to your high priest...
(off their looks)
Excuse me... your bishop.

They reach the end of the courtyard, Mascius stops and before he takes his leave --

MASCIUS (CONT'D)
Gentlemen, we *must* learn to coexist. You wish many liberties from Rome without offering the same tolerance to her in return. I implore you to understand. Salvete.

Mascius tips a bow and exits. The clergy remains with doubts.

EXT. IMPERIAL PALACE - PRIVATE COURTYARD/GARDENS - DAY

Diocletian's toga billows as he walks with his courtiers, servants, and guards. Mascius keeps up, holding paperwork.

Among them is EMMELIA (20s), a servant girl carrying a platter of wine. Comely face, tender brown eyes beyond her years. Maximian LEERS at her as he marches.

DIOCLETIAN
Twenty six??

MASCIUS
Yes, sire. Twenty of whom have claims over a diocese.

DIOCLETIAN
Too much liability. I want a peasant who will help me cultivate the evisceration of their network once and for all, one who will bend under the will of Rome.

MASCIUS
Surely, the six bishops overseeing mere communes are suitable candidates.

DIOCLETIAN
Precisely...

Diocletian turns into the GARDEN and abruptly STOPS -- Emmelia BUMPS into him and spills wine onto his toga. Everyone freezes, she catches on a breath, bows her head as he GRABS her BRUISED arm. Incensed --

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
Leave.

She scoops the gourd and chalice and dares to glimpse up at the lascivious Maximian before treading off.

Diocletian looks back over to what made him stop -- a STATUE of himself being carved by stonemasons. Admiring himself...

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
Mascius... which of these six buffoons is worthy of such a title?

EXT. MYRA - DAY

HOOVES kick dust, an OUTRIDER gallops across town. Past temples and the amphitheater, cresting the hills...

EXT. VILLAGE, MYRA - DAY

The rider slows his horse, approaching Father Aerius outside of the church. Nicholas walks out, tossing on his robe.

RIDER
Bishop Nicholas of Myra?

NICHOLAS
Who asks?

RIDER
The emperor of Rome.

Nicholas is rendered speechless.

RIDER (CONT'D)
He's ordered your transfer.

Off Nicholas' rattled look, he removes a wax-sealed letter.

RIDER (CONT'D)
You are to resume your position as bishop in the imperial city. Your escort will arrive in two days time.

Nicholas takes the letter and rips it open. He reads it, validating the message...

NICHOLAS
Impossible...
(beat)
Why would *I* be elected by acclamation of the assembly?

The rider's lip curls smugly at the naivety.

RIDER
Assembly? You may want to reevaluate your image of Rome, sir. Good day.

The rider gallops off as Nicholas lingers. Father Aerius takes the letter and reads it, incredulous...

FATHER AERIUS
The Episcopal See of the imperial city...
(off Nicholas' look)
this is God's will, Nicholas...

NICHOLAS
I don't think God is too interested in Rome, Father.

Nicholas gazes out over the Mediterranean, a STREAK of sunlight shimmers across it as far west as the eye can see.

INT. NICHOLAS' BEDROOM - NIGHT

Moonlight spills in, a CANDLE burns near the bed. Nicholas sits, staring at the letter adorning the seal of the emperor.

Still letting it sink in. He places the letter down, turns and BLOWS out the candle.

OVER BLACK... *specks of white fade in...* becoming SNOWFLAKES. A white forest EMERGES... And we're in a DREAM SEQUENCE...

A twig SNAPS, snow CRUNCHES, a pair of BOOTS come into frame as we pull up to reveal Nicholas. Clad in heavy fur, breath vaporing, surveying the quiet snow-covered forest. He hears *children's laughter*... haunting, ethereal...

He follows the voices, wades through the snow, shuffles through the forest... the laughter grows louder...

As a group of CHILDREN appear standing before a solitary HUT. They beckon him, he advances, they disappear into the hut.

Nicholas arrives, takes a step into the pitch black and is struck by a FLASH IMAGE of bloody warfare!

Nicholas SNAPS AWAKE, gripped in the terror of the dream. He takes a moment to catch his breath before rising from bed...

INT. NICHOLAS' HOME - NIGHT

Nicholas tosses a log into the crackling hearth, unable to sleep. A pot of herbal posca boils over the flames, he POURS himself a cup. Eyes landing on the old Dutch man's leather scabbard resting near the wood pile before taking a seat.

Steam rises, he stares at the fire, pensive. Then FOOTFALLS echo with the THUMPING of a walking stick. From the shadows, the old Dutch man appears, in a fresh tunic, still bandaged.

OLD MAN
Couldn't sleep? Nor I.

Nicholas rises and pours him a cup of posca. The old man notices his sword before taking a seat.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)
I never thanked you properly.

Nicholas brings over the drink, hands it over.

NICHOLAS
No need.

Both sit in silence for a few beats. Staring at the fire.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
I'm to go to Rome.

The old man strangely shows little reaction, as if these are words he had already heard in another life.

OLD MAN
I'm sorry.

Nicholas bats him an uneasy glance.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)
Your duties?

Nicholas ruminates over the details but who is he kidding...

NICHOLAS
To kiss the emperor's ass until our people are granted equality before the law.

OLD MAN
Good luck.

They share a hint of a grin, sip on their drinks.

NICHOLAS
How does one find order from chaos?

OLD MAN
Become a friend of the chaos.

Words Nicholas had been expecting. He notices the tattoos.

NICHOLAS
You're from Germania.

OLD MAN
I was a sailor.

NICHOLAS
Family?

OLD MAN
Dead. From the wars. Killed by Romans while I was out at sea.

NICHOLAS
I will pray for them. How did you end up here?

OLD MAN
Pirates raided our last ship... days later I woke up on these shores with nothing but that sword. Robbed of my dignity, family, hope... So thank you for your kindness, Nicholas.

Nicholas humbled. Then the old man almost smiles to himself. Sad eyes finding some peace as he reminisces about something.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)
Nicholas... That was my son's name. A great soldier... brave, strong...

Nicholas offers a condoling look. The old man notices the scars under his tunic, knows better than to ask. He looks back at the fire, almost as if he is putting closure to it --

OLD MAN (CONT'D)
Klaas.
(off Nicholas' look)
Where I come from... it is Klaas.
That was his name, my son's.

He finishes his drink and rises, looks at Nicholas with solemnity.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)
Thank you Klaas.

Nicholas watches the old man recede back into the darkness before picking up the scabbard. He pulls the sword out and sees the engraved name on the blade -- **KLAAS.**

He gazes fixedly... then slams it back into its scabbard.

EXT. ANDRIAKE HARBOR, MYRA - MORNING

Two wooden swords CLACK as two boys swordplay near the harbor. They stop after noticing the imposing IMPERIAL GALLEY approaching the port -- a ship using both sails and oars.

INT. NICHOLAS' BEDROOM - MORNING

Nicholas, cloaked in his brown paenula, loads his satchel with books in Latin and Greek and hangs on to his bible. He lifts his straw sack over his shoulder and sweeps his eyes across his humble abode one last time before walking out.

EXT. ANDRIAKE HARBOR, MYRA - MORNING

The GALLEY docks as Maximian surveys the landscape from the foredeck. Surrounded by the twelve foot high golden STANDARDS bearing the symbols of Rome and images of caesar. A sacrifice of incense burns under the statue of NEPTUNE, god of the sea.

INT. NICHOLAS' HOME - MORNING

Nicholas walks past the wood pile and MOVES ASIDE a partition curtain in the main room... to find that the old man is no longer there. The only thing that remains of him is the *scabbard*.

His stupor is lured away by the cacophonous SOUNDS of horses.

EXT. NICHOLAS' HOME - MORNING

Nicholas walks out to see Maximian's detachment arrive into the village with their shining armor and stately wagon, holding aloft the golden standards in all their glory.

Villagers watch, uneasy. Nicholas is joined by Father Aerius.

MAXIMIAN
Nicholas of Myra.

Nicholas steps forward, studying the brute.

MAXIMIAN (CONT'D)
Marcus Valerius Maximianus,
commander of the Praetorian Guard.
I am ordered by the emperor to
provide you safe transport to Rome.

A GUARD opens the wagon door. Nicholas, without ceremony, turns to Father Aerius and rests a hand on his shoulder.

NICHOLAS
Take good care of the people,
Father. And the children...

FATHER AERIUS
The children will be fine. You just
take care of yourself, son.

Villagers mutter their farewells, some grow emotional... as Nicholas turns and crosses towards the wagon.

A village ORPHAN releases a nun's hand and runs to him... tugging on his cloak. He kneels and meets her gaze.

ORPHAN
Will you be coming back?

NICHOLAS
I don't know.
(beat)
But remember what I taught you?
That regardless of where we are...

ORPHAN
(points to her heart)
That the home resides here.

NICHOLAS
That's right. Now take care of your
little brothers and sisters while
I'm gone, you hear?

She HUGS him, nodding while nestled in his large shoulder. He fills with a vulnerability we have not seen in him before.

Maximian takes careful note before growing impatient.

MAXIMIAN
Plenty of children in Rome that need saving, let's go.

Nicholas not humored, realizing this will be a *long* trip. He climbs into the wagon. Maximian spurs his horse and the detachment begins their clamorous exodus.

INSIDE WAGON, Nicholas pulls aside the curtain and watches his village fade into memory...

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE, BATH CHAMBER -- NIGHT

Candles glow in the steam and illuminate ivory tiles as SERVANTS tend to Prisca. Her hair brushed, jewelry removed, and the one washing her feet is EMMELIA.

She keeps her eyes on Emmelia's bruises.

PRISCA
Emmelia.

EMMELIA
Yes domina...

PRISCA
Does my husband give you those bruises?

Emmelia carefully considers her response... she wells with buried emotion.

EMMELIA
No domina.

Prisca knows she is lying, has a concerned gaze. Emmelia dries her feet and curtsies to leave before having to answer any more dicey questions... but Prisca GRABS her hand.

Emmelia catches on a breath... as Prisca silently reaches into her own gown and pulls out something that surprises us... *a rosary*... And she gently places it in Emmelia's palm.

PRISCA
Women have a voice in their world. Keep yours quiet in this one... for now.

Emmelia not sure what to make of it...

EMMELIA
Domina... I am not one for religious...

PRISCA
Go.

Emmelia consents. Takes the rosary and leaves the room.

INT. ROMAN GALLEY - OUT AT SEA - NIGHT

Nicholas sits in his cabin chamber, nestled in the bowels of the ship. Candles illuminate his books and parchments.

He is interrupted by the heavy FOOTSTEPS of Maximian, who approaches and doesn't take a seat immediately. Rather, he removes his dirk and stakes it into the table. He divests his breast plate and sets that down along with his greatsword.

Stripped of his entitlements, he takes a seat near Nicholas. Both husky men not ones for small talk or intimidation.

Maximian's eyes rove down to Nicholas' sleeveless shoulder, where we now see his *mutilated* SPQR tattoo. A severe offense to a loyal career soldier like Maximian.

MAXIMIAN
I knew you weren't the religious sort. Your blood runs with Rome.

NICHOLAS
My blood runs red like yours.

MAXIMIAN
(leaning in)
Mark my words, Christian... the emperor's leniency will not last. And the fate of your people will rest solely on your decisions. Any rebellion and I will not hesitate to flog and decapitate each and every one of you.

Nicholas just holds his gaze, not doing him the favor of exposing how disturbed he is by him. Maximian rises, collects his belongings and marches out.

EXT. MEDITERRANEAN SEA - DAWN

The sun rises. Igniting the sky over the sea in crimson as the GALLEY emerges from the distance...

EXT. GALLEY - DAWN

Nicholas climbs up from the cabins and steps onto the foredeck. Trying to take in the image before him... ROME. A *fire* burns atop a LIGHTHOUSE at the mouth of the River Tiber, where the large Ostia harbor comes into view...

EXT. OSTIA HARBOR - ROME - MORNING

The harbor of Rome is a jungle of MASTS, capable of docking over 1200 merchant vessels. Most docked and out of business as a wild bustle of SAILORS and desperate BARTERERS blares.

Most sailors loiter and wait for work. Others try to maneuver their goods around the bartering citizens and slaves. Tensions grow, fights nearly ensue, guards try to keep order.

Maximian's galley docks. The harbor is a city -- Buildings, forums, trade posts surround every inch of the port.

Nicholas is dazed by the kaleidoscope of sights and sounds. Maximian steps up. Hands over a wax-sealed parchment.

MAXIMIAN
My men will show you to your quarters within the city walls. The emperor expects you at the imperial palace tonight. You will address him as Dominus Noster.

Maximian marches off. Praetorians wait to escort Nicholas.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE, BANQUET HALL - NIGHT

A red veil slices the air with a seductive WHOOSH -- Revealing a profligate banquet teeming with glitzy courtiers and tables of delicacies spread along detailed tapestries.

Starkly contrasted from the plight of the average people we saw earlier.

The dancer gyrates with the hypnotic drum beat. TWO GLADIATORS fight to the death for a small crowd.

Diocletian and his court lay stretched out on lavish couches... including Tetrarchs, patricians, some senators, Mascius and Prisca. His drunken gaze follows the dancer. Constantine mingles as he must with the plebs and patricians.

Maximian consorts with his brutish Praetorians, drinking wine, admiring women.

His eyes burst with infatuation for EMMELIA, who carries a platter of fruit across the room, avoiding eye contact.

Nicholas enters the hall, dressed in a simple tunic. Sticking out, uncomfortable. A SENTRY greets him, whispers in his ear, and he wills himself towards the royal court with the sentry.

Many quiet down and glance up at Nicholas... Diocletian waits with a drunken smirk... The sentry nudges Nicholas...

NICHOLAS
Caesar...

The sentry grimaces, everyone looks stunned.

SENATOR
Your impudence will earn you an early grave, Christian. Address the emperor properly.

Nicholas looks around him... repulsed more than he lets show, knows he has to play their politics... learning quick --

NICHOLAS
I beg your pardon... Dominus Noster.

Constantine watches, impressed, Nicholas notices. Diocletian swells with a sense of victory, secretly relieved --

DIOCLETIAN
Ladies and gentlemen, Rome’s bishop! A wise choice, Mascius!

He SLAPS Mascius on the back, who spills his wine. Prisca rolls her eyes. Nicholas surveys the drunken haze...

PRISCA
Nicholas, I am Prisca. Welcome to our home.

NICHOLAS
Madam.

PRISCA
Please, help yourself to anything you’d like here.

PATRICIAN
No human flesh to eat though I’m afraid!

PATRICIAN 2
Yes yes, how do you miscreants say...
(picking up the bread and wine)
The body and blood of Christ?

PATRICIAN 3
Quite vile, cannibal dogs.

They share drunk laughter, scoffing away. Motioning to another section --

DIOCLETIAN
Bishop, I've arranged a seat for you amongst your cohorts.

NICHOLAS
My cohorts?

DIOCLETIAN
Other leaders, chieftains, tribal heads... Rome is full of various creeds, my friend. Undoubtedly, everyone wants a piece of her.

The patricians and senators laugh.

Nicholas acknowledges Prisca's kindness and shares a brief look with Constantine before sauntering off to another section of couches and entertainment -- Accompanied by a party of colorful and outlandishly adorned GUESTS.

Slaves fan and feed them. Nicholas sticks out even more now, he breaks bread, surveys the circus almost amusingly...

NICHOLAS
It seems I've come under-dressed...

He receives steely gazes, expectantly, and shifts his gaze over to the party, wanting nothing to do with them.

A senator, SCIPIO, leans in to Diocletian --

SCIPIO - SENATOR
No other bishop in their right mind would ever attend this, much less stand *there*. Well played, sire.

Diocletian gloats prematurely. NICHOLAS' eyes land on...

EMMELIA, in the distance, cleaning up ravaged platters. An imposing SHADOW is cast upon her as she looks up to... Maximian. She drops her gaze. The wine inspires his lust...

MAXIMIAN
How much is a girl like you worth to the emperor? Just so you're apprised my dear, I intend to relieve you from this madness someday... As a freed slave...

He lifts her chin, her timid eyes meeting his nefarious ones.

MAXIMIAN (CONT'D)
...Of course not without consenting to my marriage.

She stifles her fear, grabbing her last dish and BANG -- runs into another guard and DROPS everything onto the tiles.

The men LAUGH, SCORN. She tries to clean up hastily, looking up at the alcohol coursing through their veins... she looks back down and shuts her eyes for a moment... when --

NICHOLAS (O.S.)
Are you alright?

She opens her eyes, soothed by such simple words she's too often denied... as she glances up at Nicholas, unsure of this stranger's motive.

Nicholas understanding her hesitation, starts to scoop up the broken ceramic and places it on the platter.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Be careful not to cut your hands.

Although abashed, a sense of comfort settles in her as they wordlessly clean the broken pieces.

Constantine watches from afar. Maximian GLARES at this sight. Not just a madman now but a jealous madman.

Nicholas rises with the platter, hands it over to her.

EMMELIA
Thank you.

She slides away, luring his gaze with her. He turns back to a human wall -- Maximian. More guards encircle him...

Then a HAND grabs Nicholas' shoulder as the guards ease up. That hand belonging to Constantine.

CONSTANTINE
Bishop. Let's get some fresh air, shall we?

Nicholas abides and walks off with the Tribune. Stealing a glance in the direction Emmelia went off to.

Maximian's hatred for Constantine only intensifies, eyes set on both of them receding.

The gladiators GROAN, one BREAKS the other's neck only to a light applause as the people have diverted their attention. DIOCLETIAN takes note, irked --

DIOCLETIAN
The plebs are bored so easily these days.

SENATOR
A common hazard, sire... Seems the mob has seen everything we can throw at them.

His wheels spin, eyes landing on Nicholas receding...

DIOCLETIAN
Not everything...

EXT. STREETS IN ROME - NIGHT

HOOVES clatter along stone as Nicholas and Constantine softly ride. The hush combated by the lurid sounds of the distant Forum -- where the towering STATUES of the gods rise above the buildings atop their columns. Emerging in and out of the shadows are whores being "courted" by drunken plebs.

NICHOLAS
My first day in Rome and I've already made enemies.

CONSTANTINE
I would deem you mad if it were any other way.

NICHOLAS
A Tribune should be the most mentally-sound man here, then.

Constantine shows a slight grin, surveys the moonlit city...

CONSTANTINE
I am a wishful thinker, Nicholas.

NICHOLAS
(pointedly)
As I.
(off Constantine's look)
(MORE)

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
I wish to hold council with the emperor regarding our taxes, Constantine.

Constantine may have underestimated Nicholas' grit.

CONSTANTINE
Rome was not built in one day, Nicholas, and you certainly can not change it in one neither.

NICHOLAS
If I wanted to do that, I would petition explicitly for the charter.

CONSTANTINE
Until you are settled, my suggestion is to do as you see done. For your own neck.

NICHOLAS
And how settled was Bishop Lucius before he lost his?

Constantine knows it's too soon to share his common disdain.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
I may not be as strident as the others, Constantine, but I do wish the same liberties for my people.

They arrive at a fork. Constantine considers the sentiment.

CONSTANTINE
I will speak with him in the coming weeks. You have my word.

Nicholas nods in thanks but remains wary of Constantine. Before parting ways --

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
And Nicholas... her name is Emmelia in case your holiness was wondering. She lives near the Aventine but, she does come with a warning... as you noticed. Welcome to Rome.

Constantine spurs his horse and rides off. Nicholas watches... eyes reflecting the pearly moonlight...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ESTATE, OUTSKIRTS OF CITY - ESTABLISHING - MORNING

The sun rises over an ESTATE along the valleys outside of the city and inside the defensive Aurelian/Servian walls. The valleys are host to several other estates and villas.

INT. ESTATE, HOUSE CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

The estate serves as a makeshift church and meeting place. Nicholas is officially consecrated by Father Livius and the pulpit before a large CROWD cramped into the atrium. Rows of large votive CANDLES illuminate the room.

The holy phrases are intoned and the ceremony carried out as a new *Ecclesiastical ring* is slid onto his finger. Livius genuflects as the crowd follows in his wake.

Nicholas takes the chalice from Livius' hands and has a drink... as he surveys the kneeling crowd and his new life.

EXT. IMPOVERISHED DISTRICT - SUBURRA - DAY

Nicholas and Father Livius shuffle through the cramped Suburra. Crowds are gathered near the inadequate public latrines and fountains.

Many acknowledge Nicholas as he passes by -- offering salutations such as "Grace to you, bishop..."

FATHER LIVIUS
...Churches are illegal in Rome, Nicholas. We gather where we can.

They enter a hodgepodge of apartment buildings and INSIDE -- A maze of corridors leads them to another DOOR --

FATHER LIVIUS (CONT'D)
But the real nerve-center is actually below Rome.

He opens the door to a staircase and descends UNDERGROUND.

INT. CATACOMBS OF ROME - DAY

Upon reaching the bottom, the old priest removes a TORCH from the sconce and crosses the darkness, flame GLOWING along the walls. VOICES carry through the thick air, *proliferating*...

And from the infinity of darkness the catacombs EMERGE... a massive labyrinth aglow in the luminance of torches and candles.

Carved from the volcanic tuff rock with some tunnels rising four floors high. Utilized as a burial site and a safe haven for worship. Nicholas is floored by what he sees.

NICHOLAS
My God...

FATHER LIVIUS
Welcome to our church, our cemetery... our asylum from Rome.

Nicholas glides past the throngs praying, gathering, even PAINTING pictorials along the walls to be remembered by.

The tunnel leads into just one of many SANCTUARIES. A makeshift alter hosts candles under a fresco of Christ in thorns, many pray. Nicholas rather than angered by the plight of his people is humbled and inspired by their fortitude. His duty to fight for them deepening.

EXT. ESTATE, HOUSE CHURCH - NICHOLAS' OFFICE - DAY

Nicholas sits at his desk, haggard, pouring through towers of parchments. DEACONS drop more paperwork on his desk --

CASSIUS
Petitions, complaints, requests, baptisms, funerals...

Nicholas drops his reed pen, studies the bulk, as another DEACON rushes in --

DEACON
Bishop Nicholas! Brother Cassius! Trouble in the Suburra!

Nicholas springs out of his seat and rushes out with Cassius.

EXT. IMPOVERISHED DISTRICT - SUBURRA - DAY

A looming RIOT has erupted in the lower-class market place. Christians are mobbed around city GUARDS arresting a large group of CITIZENS including elders and young children.

Brother Marcus and Father Livius try calming the rioters. Nicholas rushes into the fray to see the prisoners being dragged away. A wall of GUARDS stand before the crowds, denying them access, stopping Nicholas.

NICHOLAS
What is their crime?!

GUARD
Thieves is all they are! Now move back! Step back!!

There is nothing Nicholas can do as he watches, eyes landing on a mounted Maximian, staring back at him with gloating eyes. He spins his horse and trots off with the escort.

INT. MAGISTRATE'S COURT - ROMAN FORUM - DAY

A court diary is recorded by a SECRETARY as we pull out to a courthouse veneered in marble. A MAGISTRATE sits in his ivory curule seat. Armed city guards and attendants are present.

Standing before the Magistrate is Nicholas and the group of chained PRISONERS facing sentence.

MAGISTRATE
Have you anything to say before the verdict is pronounced?

NICHOLAS
This is blasphemy, sir! To deny these people a proper defense is unconstitutional --

MAGISTRATE
Your creed gave up their constitutional rights when they chose to disassociate themselves with Rome, bishop.

NICHOLAS
This will create outrage, sir...

MAGISTRATE
You are fundamentally at odds with everything we have stood for for a thousand years. The only outrage here is your own insolence. How dare you? I pronounce the accused guilty of theft as well as sedition against the emperor! The penalty is death in the arena!

Nicholas loses a breath, utterly helpless as the guards drag the despondent prisoners away.

EXT. STREETS OF ROME - NIGHT

The alleyways glow with torches. Nicholas walks with Constantine, speaking quietly.

CONSTANTINE
My veto powers only lie with matters concerning the plebs, Nicholas. I wish there was something I can do, I really do.

NICHOLAS
The city is enforcing taxes and refusing them jobs! What else would you have them do to put food into their mouths?!

Constantine stops and turns to him --

CONSTANTINE
How about learning to bend your own principles a little, Nicholas??

He almost regrets the words the moment they left his mouth as Nicholas resigns.

NICHOLAS
Foolish of me to think I can change Rome in a day. Tribune...

He tips a nod and disappears, leaving Constantine contrite.

EXT. IMPERIAL PALACE - DAWN

A gray sky shrouds the city, denying light from the rising sun. Nicholas' red cloak is striking in the bleak morning, he means business, as he scales the Imperial Palace steps and is stopped by a flock of GUARDS.

NICHOLAS
I request an audience with the emperor. Please, it is urgent.

Then, from behind the dark colonnades, Maximian steps forth. Nicholas is not surprised, he suppresses his anger.

MAXIMIAN
I warned you, preacher. Rebellion will not end well for you.

Nicholas knows there is no reasoning to be had, he casts a stern gaze and marches off. Maximian's lip curls as he turns back and crosses the columns... revealing *Diocletian* coolly leaning against one. Feeling the rush of power.

EXT. STREETS IN ROME - CLOUDY MORNING

The drone of the morning buzz has begun. Some merchants open shop, some don't. The poor litter the streets. Nicholas walks through, crestfallen, surveying the landscape. The hem of his red cloak dragging along the puddled street, lifeless.

He spots VANDALS scrawling on the walls, depicting their plight... *murder, hunger, burning the city*. Nicholas is intrigued, sees citizens responding to them as they stream past, realizing their political power. He approaches a group -

NICHOLAS
Can they change the mind of a city?
An emperor?

VANDAL
The paintings never lie, Christian.

But the sounds of MARCHING guards rattle the vandals, who make haste and clear out. Nicholas deflates... looks down at his red reflection in the black puddle he is standing over...

INT. ARENA PIT - MORNING

PITCH BLACK, muffled sounds of moans and prayers. From above, a steel HATCH is opened as hazy sunlight pours in. The ARRESTED CHRISTIANS squint upwards, caked in dirt, as they're dragged out by the guards.

EXT. ARENA - CLOUDY MORNING

Raucous PLEBEIAN SPECTATORS fill the amphitheater veiled with decorative tarps and flags. Wooden crossbeams and columns surround the sandy arena floor and connect to holding cells.

Hundreds more gather around the fringe spewing the same malign excitement. Amongst them are a hooded Nicholas, Cassius, and Marcus. Blending, inconspicuous.

Constantine watches with some senators from the corner seats.

TRUMPETS blast. The spectators look over to the royal court being escorted to a designated imperial box by Maximian, Praetorian archers and heavily armored Centurions.

The plebs are surprised the emperor is in attendance --

PLEBS
Must be a juicy match if the caesar
dragged his royal ass here.

Diocletian and Prisca are seated. Emmelia and two other servants carry a platter of viands and wine.

Diocletian is surrounded like a fortress by his militia, he is untouchable. He raises his hand in greeting but from the corner knows he sees Nicholas in the surrounding crowd.

GUARDS drag the chained Christians onto the arena floor. Nicholas struggles to take his eyes off of the five children amongst them.

ARENA, their chains are undone and weapons are tossed before them. The elders just take a seat.

The holding cells open as three unnerving GLADIATORS exit, with their barbaric weapons and fear-inducing faceplates.

NICHOLAS tries remaining firm. The Christians pray, others hold the children close.

GLADIATORS
Pick up the weapons!
(no response)
They just want a show, pick up your damn weapons and just run around!

No answer. A gladiator DRAGS a woman off a child by her hair. A MALE prisoner tries to intervene but a gladiator CLUTCHES his throat and SMASHES his helmet into his face.

The man DROPS as the gladiator raises his spear and SLICE! The crowd cheers! An elder picks up a sword and attacks --

ELDER
Damn you to hell!

SLICE! A gladiator runs him through, removes the blood-drenched sword. The women shield the children's eyes.

NICHOLAS' eyes glaze over, cringing his jaw in raw anger.

MAXIMIAN whispers to Diocletian -- A gladiator looks up -- Diocletian offers a subtle nod and glimpses towards Nicholas.

As the gladiators move in on the children. Screams and cries are batted away, the children are raised into the air...

Prisca looks away. Daggers are removed by the gladiators.

NICHOLAS quivers... *forcing his eyes away*... glimpsing at a sconce on the column he is leaning against, the FLAMES from the torch dance across his eyes...

The sounds of the CRIES blare in his ear... like echoes from his past, resurfacing, the screams of the *burning soldiers*, taunting him.

He roves his eyes back down... and in a momentous decision, *he throws off his hooded robe* and marches into the arena.

MARCUS
Nicholas!

CASSIUS
Dear God...

Nicholas snatches a MACE and makes short work of the two gladiators holding the children -- BASHING one across the knees and DRILLING the other in the gut before knocking him out with a BLOW to the face!

SLASH! He's CUT by the third gladiator and SMASHED across the face! He falls on all fours and takes a KICK to the gut. The gladiator raises his SWORD and ARCS it down but the bloodied Nicholas BATS the gladiator's arm away with the mace and deftly STRIKES him in the throat.

As the gladiator doubles over, Nicholas snatches his own dagger and *drives it through his hand* into a post, nailing him to it as he SCREAMS under a completely SILENCED crowd.

Nicholas breathes heavily, still registering what he just did as DIOCLETIAN grins under his skin. Emmelia stops pouring wine midway, incredulous.

Constantine can not believe what he just witnessed. As the crowds ERUPT with applause and chant towards the imperial box -- "Dominus Noster!" "Dominus Noster!" "Dominus Noster!"

Nicholas looks at the prisoners and the children, then sweeps his eyes across the ruckus around him.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE, THRONE ROOM - DAY

Diocletian is poised in his ivory curule seat, set on a platform on the throne room floor, draped in a grandiose toga. Mascius sits below, recording. Guards are stationed.

A bruised and beaten Nicholas stands before Diocletian. Constantine is off to the side watching.

DIOCLETIAN
Now... as for your complete disregard for our laws... I should have you imprisoned and those prisoners beheaded immediately.
(MORE)

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
Yet, you come here with the audacity of requesting legal and social justice...

NICHOLAS
My request is for the civil rights of Roman citizens...

DIOCLETIAN
Roman citizens who disgrace Rome itself!

Diocletian calms himself and delivers his calculated plan...

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
Alas, the gift of freedom for the prisoners is one I am willing to grant. Yet... as reprimand for your impetuous behavior, a tribute tax of two antoniniani shall be enforced upon the Christian sect.
(looks at Mascius)
Make it known... that any who wish to abandon their faith shall be pardoned from the tax and given their legitimate... *civil rights.*

Nicholas angered at the card he has allowed Diocletian to play, simply tips a bow --

NICHOLAS
Sire...

He turns and is escorted out by guards, glancing over at Constantine before leaving the room.

INT. ESTATE, HOUSE CHURCH - ATRIUM - NIGHT

Church members SHOUT amongst each other, at Livius and the pulpit. Confused, angry. A member tosses down his rosary --

MEMBER
That man, our *bishop,* has made us look like those barbaric Romans!

IN AN ADJACENT ROOM, Nicholas sits against his bed. Struggling to dress the gash on his arm. Hearing the voices.

ATRIUM

ANOTHER MEMBER
His actions have only inflamed an already oppressive tax load!

Cheers and opposition ring out! But the voices are breached by a METAL CLANG! All eyes land on a set of SHACKLES on the floor... where the freed PRISONERS stand with Brother Marcus beside EMMELIA and the five CHILDREN. Holding votive candles.

EMMELIA
Please... by all means, chain yourselves. Because that is precisely what they wish to happen. Fight amongst yourselves and be quick to condemn the man who's *actions* saved the lives of these people... these children. I am not a member of your church nor have I been one to uphold any of Rome's silly religions but I know if ever there were a time for you to coalesce, it is now. Stand behind him, he needs you.
(re: children)
They need you.

It resonates clearly. She carries on towards Nicholas' room.

NICHOLAS' ROOM, the door opens as he looks up to see Emmelia enter with the children, rendering him slightly surprised.

EMMELIA (CONT'D)
How are you feeling?

NICHOLAS
How do I look?

EMMELIA
Ghastly.

He figured as much. He tries getting up but he aches.

EMMELIA (CONT'D)
You should sit.

He plops back down as she slides in and preps a wet cloth and wooden stitching awl. Nicholas beckons the children to come.

NICHOLAS
What are your names?

They patter over, timid, muttering their names individually --

CHILDREN
Clement, Junius, Flavius, Alba, Cassia.

NICHOLAS
Never again set your hearts on stealing no matter how strong the temptation, you hear?

They nod. He studies their dirty nails and tattered sandals.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Do any of you have parents?

The shake their heads. Nicholas remains firm with them.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Well... this shall be your new home then. A shared bedroom will be arranged and meals will be provided accordingly.

This alleviates their fear a bit. Father Livius appears at the door and Nicholas leans in to the children, softly --

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
And you can pull on Father Livius' beard when he is sleeping. He makes funny noises when you do that.

They giggle and glance back at Father Livius. A smile etches Nicholas' bruised face.

FATHER LIVIUS
Laughing at my expense, are we? Come children... come.

Livius ushers them out. Emmelia soaks a cloth and cleans Nicholas' wound.

NICHOLAS
How angry are they?

EMMELIA
Frankly? Those children may be the only friends you have left.

NICHOLAS
Should I be worried about that awl in your hand then?

She starts stitching the gash, lets show a slight grin. He winces, studies her.

EMMELIA
You're concerned about a woman with a pointy stick after I watched you immobilize three gladiators?

Out of shame, he declines a response.

EMMELIA (CONT'D)
Where did you even learn to fight like that?

NICHOLAS
In another life.

She respects his reservations, refrains from further inquiry.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
I apologize you had to see that.

EMMELIA
Stay in Rome long enough and you'll have seen it all. Makes you start to wonder about yourself.

NICHOLAS
No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to all man. I am quite particular about that verse.

EMMELIA
What does it mean?

NICHOLAS
It means you are not alone.

This hits a nerve. He studies her.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
How long have you been in bondage, Emmelia?

EMMELIA
Since my parents died. At a very young age.

He doesn't press on. But can not take his eyes off of her. She finishes stitching, looks up and catches his gaze... a charged moment... he gathers himself, abashed.

NICHOLAS
Uh, thank you...

She smiles to herself and cuts the thread. Chagrined at where she must return to now... he rises with her.

EMMELIA
Nicholas, you should lay down...

NICHOLAS
The least I can do is walk you out.

He saunters alongside her with an aching step, *she slides her arm around his waist in assistance*...

EXT. ESTATE, HOUSE CHURCH - NIGHT

Thin clouds glide under a bejeweled sky, the valleys are awash in milky starlight across from the flickering flames of the city. Emmelia covers herself in a veil and gives Nicholas one last look; he returns it, not wanting her to go, as she turns and slides away... silhouetted against the night...

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - CORRIDORS - LATER THAT NIGHT

Constantine has retired for the evening. Weary and pensive, he walks with some senators who chatter up politics.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - COURTYARD - NIGHT

Emmelia walks briskly, crossing through the moonlit courtyards, avoiding eye contact with guards. She turns a quiet corner and comes to an abrupt HALT as Maximian appears.

MAXIMIAN
And where was my lady at this hour?

Fearful, she tries walking past --

EMMELIA
Matters with the empress.

But he GRIPS her arm. Her reaction suggests she knows her fate, as he FORCES her against the wall, gushing with lust.

His large hand slides across her face and down her body as we hear her undergarment rip. He unfastens his belt and undoes his armor plate as she tries to remain tough. He shushes her.

COURTYARD, Constantine bids a good night to the senators but stops to meet his REFLECTION in the fountain, unsure he likes what he sees. But his stupor is interrupted by distant SOUNDS of struggle. Curious, he walks towards that direction.

QUIET CORNER, Emmelia makes an effort to move but Maximian pins her still and prepares to rape her just as --

CONSTANTINE (O.S.)
Maximian!

He turns... glares at Constantine in a manner that would scare most men off but Constantine stands stern. The brute fastens up and steps over to him...

MAXIMIAN
I should gut you right here like they did your whore mother.

CONSTANTINE
You can try... and if you succeed, the Plebeian council will have you hung for violating my sacrosanct. Emperor's monkey or not.

Maximian bristles... SHOULDERS past him. Constantine looks over at Emmelia with concerned eyes.

INT. SENATE HOUSE - NIGHT

Constantine TOSSES a chalice -- CLANG! It clatters against the stone floor. He drinks from a wine gourd, red-rimmed eyes sweeping the *empty senate house in dismal silence*. A senator we recognize enters the hall, slides next to him.

LEPIDUS
Something troubles you, Constantine.

CONSTANTINE
Everything Lepidus, everything troubles me.
(points at the empty curule seat)
That man troubles me... marching around with his pompous fineries and spineless cronies. Our city falls apart while he occupies himself, excuse me he OBSESSES himself with this one creed. Meanwhile, the Imperial treasury is damn near dry since he's militarized the entire empire, medical care is not even a second thought, and more than half of the grain ships are coming in short from Alexandria...
(sighs)
This is not the Rome my father would have wanted to see, Lepidus.

LEPIDUS
The Republic is long dead, son, and the empire has spun out of control.
(MORE)

LEPIDUS (CONT'D)
Alas, I suggest you reserve your antipathy to yourself, young tribune.

CONSTANTINE
Until Rome, as we know it, has faded into the ashes of history...

LEPIDUS
Everything has its end, son. Even Rome. Maybe it is simply her time.

Lepidus rests a hand on his shoulder and slides out. Constantine is left in brooding thought...

EXT. ROME, WINTER - MORNING

Smoke rises from the city. Winter has arrived and brought with it a cold rain. The streets barren. Merchants closed.

The poor huddle around fires under inadequate shelter, fighting for space. Others fight for food, one bites into a dead rat. A beggar with one eye chants to a pagan deity in a smoke ritual, sounds of brothels and fighting are heard.

The massive Ostia harbor sits in silence, crowded with empty merchant vessels see-sawing in the growing waves.

EXT. ESTATE, HOUSE CHURCH - MORNING

Nicholas, Livius, Marcus, and Cassius stand outside surveying the dreary weather and landscape.

LIVIUS
The winter is here. Our grains are short. Our shelter is inadequate.

MARCUS
What do we do, Nicholas?

Nicholas MUST maintain fortitude over growing concern...

NICHOLAS
Our strength is not in numbers but in how well we can unify against the forces trying to dismantle us.

Slowly thinking, eyes flickering with an idea...

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Have every member sell any dispensable belonging, retain only the essentials and donate the funds to the church. I will assign the three of you to overlook and allocate those funds accordingly... half a loaf of bread and two amphoras of drink per family each day. We live efficiently, we live meager, we survive. And the same goes for all of the funds allotted to the missionaries...

CASSIUS
The missionaries??

MARCUS
Nicholas, that is sacrilege. The gospels must be preached --

NICHOLAS
Their preaching can wait, Marcus. Half of the church's money is frozen in their endeavors. What good is their blathering if we fail to stand up for ourselves in Rome??

Marcus and Cassius acquiesce. Again, Nicholas illustrates how he distinguishes himself from any previous bishop.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Cut off the funds, all of them. And bring the men back. Our fortitude will be a message to the Romans. That we are here to stay. As equal men.

Livius simply rests a hand on his shoulder approvingly.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT./EXT. ESTATE/ROME - DAY & NIGHT - WINTER SEASON

- coins of all denominations are tossed into collection baskets by various hands...

- Nicholas helps and directs the building of a PAVILION next to the estate, similar to the one in Myra.

- porridge is stirred in a large pot, we PULL OUT to reveal ROWS of them aligned under the pavilion being stirred by the women and nuns...

- snow flurries drift across the valley as a FOOD LINE has formed along the pavilion serving nearly a hundred people.

- from the distance a hooded Prisca watches, admiring, she notices Emmelia is one of the porridge servers...

- Constantine trots across the valley in the light snow, seeing the food line that has grown in size, astonished.

- At the Ostia harbor, hungry pagans ransack the merchant vessels in search of food. They rebel and cast TORCHES onto some of them. Setting the ships AFIRE!

- In the streets of the city, light snow blows past corpses dead from hunger, disease and quarrel...

- Inside the estate/house church -- the elderly and sick are attended to... orderly, harmonious, Nicholas directing everyone -- *the five orphans are his assistants.*

- more coins are collected, baskets held by the orphans...

- the food line has grown to thousands, more porridge pots are stationed under tents next to the pavilion.

- in the food line now are the pagans who were ransacking the ships and the poor who were clamoring for food/shelter... they arrive to the servers, abashed, shaking from the cold -- Nicholas orders for them to be served... as one falls to his knees and kisses Nicholas' feet tearfully, he then kisses the cross in Nicholas' hand...

- from afar Constantine sees this... galvanized.

- secret meeting at night -- Constantine holds court with a group of senators and centurions.

- *And an orb of glowing orange rises over the horizon* in the arrival of spring...

- In the city streets, while still dark, VANDALS paint and scrawl on the walls... a BLOCK of sunlight begins to slide up the wall with the dawn... as it reaches the vandals... casting early morning upon them... they DISPERSE... and we're left staring at the colorful fresco of --

Bishop Nicholas blessing the kneeling Romans with *the five orphans taking refuge at his side.*

Inscribed with the words -- Abbas de Roma (Father of Rome)

EXT. ROMAN FORUM - SPRING DAY

A SWORD DANCE snakes through the Forum by the SALII DANCERS -- twelve patrician youths dressed as archaic warriors gripping bronze shields and white sticks. Beating a shackled MAN on a goat with calculated technique atop provocative ritual music.

Diocletian rides in a chariot behind the procession, a wreath is held above his head to deify him. Prisca next to him, not as enthusiastic as he. Praetorians surrounding him.

The public ceremony is devoid of its typical energy. Few perform street sacrifices. Many scurry off before bowing down to the chariot. Faces weathered from the rough winter.

In the shadows are Nicholas and Constantine, both hooded and inconspicuous, watching the lurid procession with disdain.

CONSTANTINE
The Salii, also known as the leaping priests of Mars. Celebrating the military might of Rome with the arrival of the season.

NICHOLAS
Why do they beat that man?

CONSTANTINE
As a sacrifice to the gods. In return for better fortune in the new year.
(tense beat)
Nicholas, I must speak with you privately.

Nicholas acquiesces and slides away. Constantine follows.

DIOCLETIAN glowers at those refusing to partake in the ceremony and recognize his divinity.

The guards notice the street paintings -- all akin to the fresco we saw earlier. Prisca grows worried as Diocletian's eyes sweep the listless atmosphere and land on a fresco --

DIOCLETIAN
HALT!!

The guards STOP in formation, the chariot halts. The dancers carry on, not noticing, the sounds of the ritual fading.

Diocletian steps down and ambles up to the fresco, eyes mixed with disbelief and genuine affliction.

Many surrounding citizens fall prostrate. He surveys around, noticing those who don't... Trying to slip away...

He GRABS a woman with her child and meets her terrified eyes. He signals Maximian, who steps forth and STRIPS her down to her undergarment, she stifles her cries, holds her child.

PRISCA
Stop this!

DIOCLETIAN
SILENCE!!

And from her ripped cloak, Maximian digs out a ROSARY... Diocletian inflamed at the sight and the weight it carries.

INT. CATACOMBS - DAY

Nicholas and Constantine wade through the swarms of people -- the placid milieu contrasting the raucous ceremony above. They step into the quiet corner of a sanctuary. Nicholas removes his hood, studies Constantine.

CONSTANTINE
Nicholas, you and I both know this depravity cannot continue.

Nicholas agrees more than he lets show.

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
If our city falls into chaos, neither you nor I will have a place to call home. With or without faith.

NICHOLAS
Our *home* has raped and murdered my people for three hundred years, which home do you speak of?

CONSTANTINE
I rest my case then.

NICHOLAS
I will not call to arms if that's what you are asking, Constantine. I can not condone bloodshed.

CONSTANTINE
Sometimes it is blood alone that moves the courses of history, brother.
(MORE)

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
I still command the loyalty of the eastern legions under my father's name... and an alliance with the dioceses will give us the proper numbers to stand against Diocletian.

NICHOLAS
The dioceses do not command proper legions.

CONSTANTINE
But the kingdom of Armenia does. King Tiridates and his royal court have been baptized, Nicholas. By the man whose teachings you have strictly followed since this --

Constantine moves aside Nicholas' tunic to reveal the mutilated SPQR tattoo on his shoulder.

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
Patron Gregory the Illuminator has converted the kingdom, the first Christian state the world has ever seen. Your numbers are growing quick, that is without a doubt. Align us and I promise your pleads for the charter will wash away into history. If declared emperor, I will grant Peace of the Church and formally legalize your religion, Nicholas. I only ask for your backing in this effort.

Nicholas hangs on these words, pondering painfully.

NICHOLAS
You speak with fortitude and eloquence, my friend. A trait innate to most great politicians.

Constantine sinks a notch. Nicholas knows he may regret these next words --

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
But too many lives have been lost at the cheap price of rhetoric. I will not ask followers of my faith to spill blood. Much less in the name of a man who himself is not a believer.

CONSTANTINE
Reason, Nicholas...

NICHOLAS
The risk is too great, Constantine.
I am sorry.

Nicholas leaves, Constantine lingers. A GNARLED FACE cloaked under a hood who was spying disappears into the shadows.

INT. ESTATE, HOUSE CHURCH - ORPHANAGE - NIGHT

Braziers light the modest room. The bunk beds are occupied by the five ORPHANS. Raptly listening to Nicholas tell a story.

NICHOLAS
...And then the shepherds saw a bright light in the sky, where an angel told them not to be afraid anymore because he had some good news. He said the Son of God had been born and they would find him in Bethlehem. And when they arrived at the stable, they were filled with joy at seeing Jesus lying in the manger.

His tired face manages a grin at their captivated faces. Father Livius enters the room.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
And that, my children, is our cue. Time to rest now.

Nicholas rises and tucks them in with Father Livius.

CLEMENT
Do you think those soldiers will come back for us, bishop?

NICHOLAS
As long as I bear the breath of life, I will protect you, do you understand?

The children nod, feeling secure.

FATHER LIVIUS
Go Nicholas, get some rest. I will finish tucking them in.

Nicholas sweeps their faces once more, stifling his concern, and marches out.

EXT. TEMPLE OF THE ORACLES - NIGHT

The sky is pregnant with storms, WINDS whistle, LIGHTNING shrieks across the dark heavens. Diocletian climbs a summit and stands before a rounded SHRINE with a pitch black ingress beyond its colonnade. Toga flailing, he enters.

INT. TEMPLE OF THE ORACLES - NIGHT

Four SYBILS (oracles of antiquity) with red veils draped over their heads down to their toes stand at the four “corners” of the rotunda. Facing out towards the tiny flickering flames of the city. Their veils flailing like the fires they look upon.

A platform holds a chained LAMB. Diocletian enters, although his presence not unbeknownst, the sybils do not turn.

SYBIL 1
What brings you to our sanctorium, caesar?

DIOCLETIAN
I come to seek council.

SYBIL 2
You are tardy.

The sybils turn and glide towards the lamb. Unlike the young beautiful women of myth, these are gypsy mystics. Old women with leathery skin and sunken eyes. One of whom we recognize as the *spy* from the catacombs.

DIOCLETIAN
What do the gods favor me to do, sybils? My plan has failed to stop this disease. The people love that Christian more than their own emperor and killing him will only make matters worse...

The sybils start to CHANT in a strange guttural tongue. One of them removes an ATHAME -- a ceremonial dagger with a double-edged blade and a black handle.

The lamb starts to wail, sensing its fate, as the blade is lifted towards it... and THRUST into its belly.

Diocletian’s EYES grow red like the bloody ceremony before him. WE HEAR the sounds of the lamb’s organs being removed.

A SYBIL lifts the lamb’s liver high into the air...

SYBIL
They tell us the tribune schemes, caesar. He must die if you wish your sovereignty protected. You know of whom we speak. Yet they urge caution with the one who calls himself the bishop. A proper arrangement can deny his martyrdom and earn back the hearts of the mob once again.

Diocletian's mind starts to swim with sinister schemes.

INT. CATACOMBS - NIGHT

Nicholas kneels before a fresco of Christ in a sanctuary. He prays, seeking answers, looking more lost than ever...

NICHOLAS
...And although he is a decent man, I cannot justify his endeavors by advocating any form of war. Yet... he offers something I can not help but want very deeply.
(beat)
I find myself confused. And I am not asking, Lord, that you take this trial away. Only to be guided in the right path with your supporting hand.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE, THRONE ROOM - NIGHT

Through a slat in a cracked-open door, Emmelia eavesdrops on Diocletian and Maximian. Their voices are faintly heard.

DIOCLETIAN
...I have larger issues at hand than your sexual appetite --

MAXIMIAN
This is different. I'm asking for your blessing to wed her, sire.

DIOCLETIAN
Are you in danger of becoming civilized, Maximian?

Maximian is not humored, Diocletian is... but shifts to a menacing tone without missing a beat --

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
Then do me a task...

He leans in and whispers words we can not hear... But EMMELIA does... as she turns and runs off.

INT. CONSTANTINE'S ESTATE, BEDCHAMBER - NIGHT

Constantine sleeps. A shadow is cast over him as a HAND reaches in... and *taps* him. He wakes -- SNATCHING a dagger from under his sheets and pointing it at -- Emmelia.

Breathing heavily, he lowers his blade, eyes inquiring...

EMMELIA
You have to leave... as soon as possible.

EXT. CONSTANTINE'S ESTATE, STABLES - NIGHT

Awash under a full moon, Constantine quickly and quietly loads a carriage with bags for a one-way trip. Emmelia is there as well, staring out onto the valleys.

CONSTANTINE
Don't be foolish, Emmelia. You're no longer safe here either.

She knows this but doesn't respond.

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
Emmelia... Emmelia!
(she turns)
There's no time! I'll have a message delivered to Nicholas after...

A SOUND stops him, he scans the surrounding darkness, reaches for his sword... when suddenly TWO CITY GUARDS pop out from the shadows.

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
Move!

He yanks out his sword and pushes Emmelia aside, managing to DEFLECT the first blow and CUT the guard down! Moving like liquid, he snatches the second sword, parries with the other guard and RUNS HIM THROUGH.

Only to turn around to another guard CHARGING in with Emmelia in the line of fire -- then through the air -- WHOOSH -- a dagger slices past and STRIKES the guard's neck.

They turn around stunned to see Maximian appear from the darkness.

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
Quick, on the horse!

She hops onto a horse as Constantine SLAPS a torch and sends the embers into Maximian's face. The brute GROANS and scrapes his face as Constantine CUTS the carriage ropes, SLINGS his leg over and WHIPS the reins! HYAH!

They BARREL out of the stables as the torch sets the hay ABLAZE!

The horse races off through the valleys as Emmelia glances back at the burning stables, the estates, the city flames... all diminishing... and bleeding into DARKNESS.

OVER BLACK... a twig SNAPS... as specks of white fade in... transpiring into SNOW FLAKES in a tranquil FOREST... *as we're back in Nicholas' dream...*

Clad in heavy fur, surveying the snowy forest, breath vaporing. He hears children's laughter and chases the voices.

Wading through the snow, crossing the woods and coming up on a solitary HUT with a group of CHILDREN standing before it. The children beckon him to come and disappear into the hut.

Nicholas approaches and takes a step into the pitch black... Rather than just being hit with a FLASH IMAGE of bloody warfare, he finds himself standing in it now.

Amidst a RAGING BATTLE ACROSS A VAST FIELD. Smoke rises. Trees burn. Soldiers die. The children nowhere to be seen.

Nicholas spots a SWORD. He REACHES for it *but an unseen force prevents him from picking it up*.

As he looks up to a dark HORSEMAN thundering towards him. Nostrils steaming from the heavily armored horse. Its rider raising his sword and SLASHING DOWN onto Nicholas --

INT. ESTATE, HOUSE CHURCH - NICHOLAS' BEDROOM - MORNING

Nicholas SNAPS AWAKE as Father Livius BURSTS into the room --

FATHER LIVIUS
Nicholas! Nicholas wake up!

NICHOLAS
Livius... what's happened?

FATHER LIVIUS
The children are gone!

Nicholas leaps out of bed, snatches his robe and marches out.

INT. ORPHANAGE - CONTINUOUS

Nicholas barges in to see the five beds empty, sheets dislodged in signs of struggle. He scans the room in a heated panic... Searching for any indications of perpetrators...

Marcus rushes into the room --

MARCUS
Nicholas, we found one of these near the atrium!

He holds up a brass navigational CHART-DIVIDER with a strange seal on it. Nicholas' complexion drops a hue.

FATHER LIVIUS
Dear God.

Nicholas takes it, studies it. All sharing the same suspicions as he finally SNAPS! HEAVING a bunk bed over and slogging out of there. Father Livius watches with concern.

FATHER LIVIUS (CONT'D)
Nicholas, consider your actions!

NICHOLAS
I made a promise to those children, Livius! I will not abandon them!

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - PORTICO/CORRIDORS - MORNING

A pack of GUARDS escort Nicholas through the high-ceilinged portico. FLAMES shimmer in massive sconces. PAGAN PRIESTS crane their heads and cast steely gazes as he marches by.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - CORRIDORS - MORNING

The escort ARRIVES to the throne room door, Maximian waits with a freshly marred face. He flicks his head, the guards clear out leaving the two men in loaded silence. Nicholas notes his blemished face, looking more threatening than ever.

MAXIMIAN
Where is she?

It's a lie to say Nicholas is not confused by the question.

MAXIMIAN (CONT'D)
Do not toy with me, preacher.

A hint of worry flashes across his eyes as his wheels spin. But not wanting to play this game with him --

NICHOLAS
Excuse me.

But the brute plants a HAND on his chest before he can move.

MAXIMIAN
Once she is mine, I swear on Jupiter's stone I will kill you if you so much as breath next to her.

NICHOLAS
Subjugate us all you want, Maximian, our choices are our own. The difference between us, though, is that my God does not uphold oaths of murder. In due time, whom do you think Rome will embrace?

Maximian boils, hand unwittingly moving over his HILT. Nicholas registering it with calm resolve. Then --

BLAM! He BACKHANDS Nicholas. Sending his head jerking sideways. Nicholas takes the heavy hand as well as one could. Feels the rivulet of blood around his mouth, suggesting a future reunion will not be so one-sided.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
(slight bow)
Sir.

Maximian finally opens the door and Nicholas steps past.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - THRONE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Nicholas enters to see Diocletian gazing out over the balustrades. Draped in traditional purple, toned down from his usual garishness, seemingly more... *relatable.* He turns, feigning concern --

DIOCLETIAN
Bishop, my condolences. I just received news.

Nicholas tries to study him over the blaring distractions - statues, golden trinkets, Maximian behind him at the door.

NICHOLAS
Rather quick for something so miniscule for you.

DIOCLETIAN
You underestimate my resources, Nicholas.

Nicholas removes the navigational chart divider.

NICHOLAS
This was found on the property.

Diocletian examines the chart-divider, quite the actor.

DIOCLETIAN
Our children should never have to be subjected to such vile creatures like pirates.

Nicholas' suspicions confirmed, he tries to remain firm.

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
Alas it is not uncommon for Roman children to fall victim to the slave trade in Crete.

Diocletian slides his arm around Nicholas' shoulder and gently ushers him towards the balcony.

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
I know relations have not always been without strife but we're not flawless now, are we?

Strange coming from a man who deifies himself. Nicholas continues to study him but is needled with desperation as they arrive onto the balcony, where hundreds of CITIZENS streaming through the courtyards start to notice them.

Diocletian waits for it...

NICHOLAS
Caesar, then I humbly ask for your resources.

DIOCLETIAN
Of course.

BUT -- *Diocletian raises his hand* towards his face and Nicholas now understands why the swiftness...

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
The finest cohort will escort you to the Golden Sea to retrieve your children, Nicholas; rest assured a moneybag will be provided to ensure a peaceful exchange.

The CITIZENS WATCH as Nicholas broodingly acquiesces and *KISSES the emperor's hand*. The citizens marvel. The ones with rosaries seem perplexed.

Diocletian's eyes are drunk with power.

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. MEDITERRANEAN SEA - NIGHT

A VIOLENT WAVE SLAMS into a GALLEY! Steering through the rough seas and rampant STORM. A wave carries us aboard and SMASHES into the sailors, sends them sliding across deck.

The captain, PONTIUS, grips the paddle.

PONTIUS
We will not last through the night!

SAILOR 1
We have angered Neptune for aiding this preacher!

They see Nicholas hugging a mast in the harsh winds.

NICHOLAS
The seas do not have their own separate God you fools!

SAILOR 3
You are right! Out here there is no God!

NICHOLAS
Where is your damn faith, man?!

Nicholas trundles across deck towards the men, clawing at anything to stay on his feet, he grips their tunics --

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Are you worthy to live? Are-you-worthy-to live??

SAILOR
Yes! Yes! You've gone mad at sea!

NICHOLAS
(not convinced)
Are you WORTHY?!

In the face of death -- confessions come out.

SAILOR 2
No! Not I! I am a drunk and a thief, preacher! Let the sea or God or Neptune or whichever God is up there take me! I am not worthy!

NICHOLAS
Rest assured you will not be going up there!

He actually stirs laughter.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
But the Lord does not forsake an honest man! Ask for his mercy! For all our sakes! Do it!!

The sailor shakes his head... acquiescing... as Pontius watches. He looks up at the dark heavens, ready to give in --

When a BURST OF LIGHT slams the sea! A wave DEVOURS the ship and washes us into oblivion... as everything goes BLACK.

After a long silent beat, sounds of a ROCKING ship and distant SHORES begin to trickle in...

EXT. SHIP - MORNING

A golden SUN beats down on the splayed sailors. They slowly come to, the last patches of wet drying on the decks. Pontius and a sailor open their eyes, glancing around in disbelief --

SAILOR 1
Hades?

PONTIUS
No. We are still alive.

They chortle in disbelief. The others awaken groggily and spot Nicholas hugging a mast, unconscious, and share a collective gaze in slight awe.

Rising, they gaze out to what can only be described as Rome's Tortuga.

PONTIUS (CONT'D)
Preacher!

Nicholas slowly comes to. Donning a layer of light facial stub now. He glances up, squints --

PONTIUS (CONT'D)
Welcome to Crete!

EXT. CRETE - MARKET PLACE - DAY

Resembling a SOUQ, this filthy scene is teeming with slave auctions, gold exchanges, prostitution rings, pirate jeering.

Nicholas, clad in his brown robe, tightens his grip on the moneybag he holds. He treks through, the crew trails him... They spot a CART carrying sold children and recognize the pirate insignia that matches the chart-divider, they follow.

EXT. PIRATE VILLAGE - DAY

Along the shore sits a putrid town and encampment. Ships and boats see-saw along the docks. Fires burn, slaves whipped, gold brought in. Nicholas and the crew enter the TOWN.

LATER, they spot the one place pirates would go after a successful heist -- A PUB. They exchange a look and enter.

INT. PUB - CONTINUOUS

Oozing with degenerates and eroded candles. Gazes shift towards Nicholas as he crosses through to the bar and holds out the chart-divider.

NICHOLAS
This seal, do you recognize it?

The bartender's eyes move passed Nicholas' shoulder --

VOICE (O.S.)
I was looking for that piece.

Nicholas turns around to a foul, repulsive PIRATE with dark Mediterranean complexions.

NICHOLAS
Sir, I will make this very simple. My name is Nicholas of Myra, bishop of Rome. I am here to negotiate the release of five children you have recently abducted.

PIRATE
I like simple, Nicholas of Myra... My name is Baldassare, captain of this here pub. And I'm here to negotiate my deal with the devil. Is there anything else or can I kill you now?

This stops Nicholas a moment, Baldassare knows why --

BALDASSARE
Is that not what you people call it? *Devil?* I am a seafaring brute, preacher... walked every corner of this wretched world...
(looks around for God)
And have yet to find your man. That's why *my* sermon is 'long live mutiny'! I am bound by nothing!

NICHOLAS
We are all bound by something, Baldassare. God, war, revenge, family...

A PIRATE in the posse appears vulnerable to that statement.

BALDASSARE
(re: the bag)
...Gold.

NICHOLAS
Not until I see the children.

Baldassare laughs. Pontius comes up to Nicholas, whispers --

PONTIUS
Give me the gold.
(off Nicholas' look)
I've been around men like this, I know how to talk to them. Let me see the bag.

Nicholas ponders before tentatively handing the bag over. But Pontius looks doubtful in his forthcoming decision...

PONTIUS (CONT'D)
(softly)
Forgive me.

-- As he hands the bag over to Baldasarre.

PONTIUS (CONT'D)
For your hard work.

Nicholas fossilizes. The pirates swarm him, restraining his arms.

PONTIUS (CONT'D)
(slightly remorseful)
Did you really think Caesar would help you?

The betrayal sinking in, his eyes imbued with spite. Baldassare taunts --

BALDASSARE
Ahh yes... we *are* all bound by something, preacher. But I sense your loyalties may have just deceived you.

He scans Nicholas' eyes, breath steaming over his face --

BALDASSARE (CONT'D)
Your trust fades and your hate grows. I see it. I smell it... Fresh off your self-righteous breath! Pity you won't get to satisfy that appetite though...

Drawing his SCIMITAR and putting it to Nicholas' face --

BALDASSARE (CONT'D)
Oh preacher, if only you had the pleasure of tasting it... the sweet sweet taste of your blade thrust through your enemies heart...

A storm begins to brew behind Nicholas' eyes.

NICHOLAS
Tell Diocletian he better pray. To whomever God he prays to... That I don't escape this wretched place.

They start to DRAG Nicholas away as the sailors watch, almost contrite, afraid they may have just condemned a holy man.

BALDASSARE
Have a drink on me, boys.

Pontius grabs Baldassare's arm --

PONTIUS
Baldassare... do us a favor. Do yourselves a favor, just... don't kill him.

Baldassare grins, with a flaunting gesture --

BALDASSARE
I see he has whispered his tales into your hearts, Romans! Let him whisper all he wants here, no one will listen!

He laughs, marches out leaving the sailors in rueful silence.

INT. DUNGEON CELL - DUSK

Nicholas is TOSSED into a grungy cell. The blood of previous inmates smeared along the walls, glowing in the torchlight.

Baldassare trudges in, rolls up his sleeves, removes a whip.

Two GUARD PIRATES follow him in -- one whom we recognize from the pub, who showed his cards for a moment after Nicholas' words. His name is AMADO -- Spanish complexion.

BALDASSARE
Now that I've promised not to kill you, I'm going to make use of you. And I'm going to beat the God out of you, preacher.

He motions his men. They shackle Nicholas to the wall and remove his robe. Baldassare winds up and...

CRACK! Snaps the hide across Nicholas' back. Leaving a fresh gash on his flesh. Nicholas cringes.

CRACK! Nicholas winces... CRACK! Nicholas groans... CRACK! CRACK! Nicholas bellows in pain!

His SCREAMS carry through the antechambers... past the filthy cells of other slaves... and finally to a cell where we see --

The FIVE ORPHANS. Clement, Cassia and the others. Huddled. Hearing the screams, fear-ridden, faces caked in dirt. They flinch with each resounding scream. Over and over...

DISSOLVE TO:

Nicholas curled up in the corner of his cell. Quivering in limbo. Long streaks of dry blood painted across his back.

FOOTFALLS echo. His eyes flutter and through a blurry POV -- Amado saunters past, gazing in. The blur INTENSIFIES...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. PIRATE VILLAGE - SHORES - DAY

The SUN beats down over the village. Nicholas is in chains, chisel and hammer gripped, breaking stones. His beard grows. He stops for a moment to gaze into the distance where the ORPHANS are forced to carry the cut stones, also chained up.

CRACK! A pirate whips him! He winces, returns to the chisel. Glancing up to see Baldasarre biting into a juicy peach, seated under an umbrella. He shakes his finger at Nicholas.

INT. DUNGEON - NICHOLAS' CELL - NIGHT

Nicholas crouches, lips dried, a bowl of water is tossed in by Baldassare -- it flips over and spills onto the stone.

Nicholas scurries over, trying to salvage it. Face to the stone, lips pursed, inhaling droplets...

INT. ESTATE, HOUSE CHURCH - ROME - NIGHT

PONTIUS rests a hand on Father Livius' shoulder, having just broken the "bad news" to him. The old priest is crestfallen.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE, THRONE ROOM - DAY

Diocletian hands moneybags over to Praetorians. Mascius records it in his financial books. Maximian watches.

DIOCLETIAN
Stray dogs is what they are now. We strike while the iron is hot, have the Aventine gangs pay them some visits. Nothing *too* obvious but tell them to have fun, that the guards will look the other way.

The Praetorians salute and take the bags.

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
And now on to the next issue at hand...

Diocletian calmly steps over to Maximian, stares him in the eyes and BACKHANDS him! The brute froths but is disciplined enough to swallow it down.

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
That is for allowing Constantine to flee. Now...
(MORE)

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
to deal with your blunder, I will need you to alert the northern legions, call in the reinforcements from the west and prepare the navy to land at the shores of the Margus in five months time. I am going to send that insolent deserter into the bowels of Hades.

EXT. FORTIFIED WAR CAMP - BYZANTIUM - DUSK

SUPER: **BYZANTIUM - FORMER CONSTANTINOPLE**

Hundreds of TENTS are staked and lifted along this massive camp. Lit braziers flicker in the encroaching evening wind.

High TOWERS rise along the corners as lookout posts. A frenzy of activity builds. Legions have come and are arriving.

Constantine treks through with his officers, appraising the progress. He spots Emmelia at one of the tents, stirring porridge, and approaches her. She gazes up in anticipation...

CONSTANTINE
Emmelia, I've just received... some unfortunate news...

She remains unhinged, just her eyes dropping.

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. I think it's time you go east, you will be well taken care of at my cousin Marcus'. This is no place for a woman to be.

A beat.

EMMELIA
How?

CONSTANTINE
The children... they were abducted. He sailed to the golden sea to bring them back. Never returned.

An inkling of hope stews somewhere in her though.

EMMELIA
We don't know for certain if he's dead yet...

CONSTANTINE
Emmelia, Crete is an unforgiving --

But he stops, sees the soft determination in her eyes...

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
I'll have a quarter set up for you then.

She's thankful. He carries on with his men.

EXT. PIRATE VILLAGE - SHORES - DAY

The sun SHIMMERS over the sea. The metronome of slave labor echoes as Nicholas breaks stone, breathes dust, face scruffy.

INT. DUNGEON - NICHOLAS' CELL - NIGHT

Nicholas sits detached from the world. FOOTFALLS echo, chains CLANG. He looks up, innervated at the sight of the ORPHANS ushered over by Amado. He carries a subtle accent from Spain.

AMADO
I convinced Baldasarre to allow visitation.

He opens the bars as the children pour in and hug Nicholas. All of them weeping. Nicholas pulls back and regards their dirty, teary-eyed faces. Acknowledging them individually --

NICHOLAS
Clement, Junius, Alba, Cassia, Flavius... Thank God...

He wipes their tears, streaking the dirt across their faces. Hugging them. Amado watches quietly from outside.

INT. CATACOMBS - ROME - NIGHT

Father Livius, Marcus, Cassius and other members mark six grave stones... just as people start RUNNING and SCREAMING as GANG MEMBERS ransack the tunnels gripping clubs and chains...

EXT. PIRATE VILLAGE - SHORES - DAY

A hazy ring shrouds the sun. Cloaking the slave camp with shimmering heat waves. Nicholas' beard grows as he hits his chisel and the children look thinner as they carry stones.

NICHOLAS
At least give them some more bread to eat!

CRACK! A whip snaps. He looks back to Baldassare and glares.

BALDASSARE
There... that's the look I want to see, preacher.

INT. DUNGEON - NICHOLAS' CELL - NIGHT

Nicholas tries reading to them from his bible but they are cold and weak as a chilly Mediterranean wind blows through the dungeon. He crawls to the bars where Amado is stationed.

NICHOLAS
Amado, could you spare us some wood?

Amado offers a slightly commiserative look.

LATER, the children all pitch in to pile the sticks atop one another. Diverting their dejection for a moment.

Nicholas gazes at his bible. Painfully pondering something.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
(sotto)
Forgive me.

He opens the book and TEARS OUT PAGES... Crumpling them and wedging them into the wood.

LATER, a FIRE crackles. The children are huddled, asleep. Nicholas watches, then regards his bible with the torn pages burning.

AMADO (O.S.)
We do what we must for our children.

Nicholas looks over, slightly surprised, enervated.

AMADO (CONT'D)
I have three daughters of my own. All I have left in this life is them, preacher. That is what *I* am bound by.

NICHOLAS
What brings you to this cursed life then?

AMADO
A fool who squandered his money and dignity at the price of their future. If my daughters do not find husbands soon, they will end up sex slaves to men like Baldassare.

NICHOLAS
(realizing)
You're here trying to make up for lost time. Earn their dowry money.

AMADO
This cursed life pays, preacher. And if your hell is real then I am bound for it. I am content with this because then your God must be real too. And I would be obliged if you prayed to him for my daughters.

NICHOLAS
I read in a book once... He that gives to the poor shall not lack: but he that hides his eyes shall have many a curse.
(beat)
Amado, our choices echo in this life and ripple across time. You cannot expect deliverance while you live a life of obstructing that very thing from others.

AMADO
Then how do I help my daughters? How do I earn that money without this life?

NICHOLAS
Mysterious ways, Amado. He works in mysterious ways...

Nicholas rests his head against the wall and closes his eyes, leaving Amado to mull over this philosophy that is foreign yet intriguing to him.

INT. DUNGEON - NICHOLAS' CELL - ANOTHER NIGHT

The small fire crackles. Nicholas adds yet another *tally* to the wall with his rock.

CLEMENT
Do you think we will ever leave here, sir?

Nicholas finds himself unable to answer the question. It pains him. Tally stopping midway, he broodingly glances over, eyes landing on his bible as he tries another approach...

NICHOLAS
Clement, have I ever asked you what your favorite animal is?

Clement shakes his head at the strange question.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
You would rather me guess?

CLEMENT
It's a bird. Because then I could fly away from here.

Nicholas admires the clever response. The children grow slightly curious.

NICHOLAS
Alba... you like the garden we had at the church, right?

Alba nods her head as Nicholas picks up his bible and releases himself. Surrendering to the natural order of things as he opens it up and starts TEARING MORE PAGES OUT.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Where I come from in the east, the orientals had passed on the art of paper folding. Only a handful knew about it. Here let me show you.

Nicholas starts folding a page, noting the children's distraction from the moans and horrors of this place.

Amado watches from outside. Admiring this.

Nicholas finishes and presents *an origami bird* to Clement.

He beams with a look of wonderment, the others huddle around to hold it, pulling the tail-end making the wings flap.

JUNIUS
I want one, sir Nicholas!

FLAVIUS
Me too!

CASSIA
Can you make a pony??

ALBA
I want a flower, sir Nicholas! Can you make me a flower??

A weathered smile intrudes his face as Amado watches, moved by his ability to lift the children's spirits. Nicholas folds another page and presents Alba with a flower, she beams.

CASSIA
Me me!

JUNIUS
I was next!

NICHOLAS
You will each get one, no need to fight children. But...

He gently takes Clement's bird and hands it over to Junius --

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
The importance of this is not the gift itself... but the act of sharing it.

Shifting his gaze to Alba, she offers her flower to Cassia. Nicholas gives quiet approval. Amado watches, inspired...

As the crackling fire and the joyous voices of the children echo through the chambers...

DISSOLVING INTO...

A soft sun rising over the sea, lancing through large clouds marking the closure of summer. An Autumn wind sweeps through, the buzz of arriving boats and pirate banter takes us to...

EXT. PIRATE VILLAGE - SHORES - DAY

Nicholas, chained up, carries a chest of gold coins off of Baldassare's freshly docked ship along with other slaves.

Baldassare pushes slave girls off, laughing, lurid, drinking. Nicholas glares as Baldassare approaches, removing a cross...

BALDASSARE
Preacher! I've returned bearing a gift for you as well!
(puts it around his neck)
He prayed to your God just before I killed him.

He laughs. Slaps Nicholas across his scarred back.

BALDASSARE (CONT'D)
Your wounds are healing, preacher!

Nicholas' eyes burn with hate as he's shoved off the ship... Amado watches from the distance.

INT. DUNGEON - NICHOLAS' CELL - NIGHT

Nicholas and the children sleep in the quiet darkness with their origami toys held close by. *A faint JINGLE is heard* as a flickering GLOW is cast across Nicholas' face. He shifts.

A PEBBLE hits him in the face. His eyes flutter open and look around... landing on a TORCH inside the cell's sconce that's been empty this entire time -- *and from the sconce's peg HANGS A PAIR OF BOOTS.*

Curious, Nicholas rises and crawls over. Spotting the CELL KEYS tucked inside. Shocked, he looks around but no Amado.

He rushes over to the children. Waking them, shushing them.

NICHOLAS
(whispering)
Don't make any noise. We're getting out of here.

The children arise as Nicholas gingerly unlocks the cell door and ushers them out... moving around the anterooms and arriving at the OPENING.

He motions the children against the wall, finger to his mouth. As he quietly peeks around the corner to a GUARD PIRATE sitting outside silhouetted under the moonlight.

Quietly scanning the inert pirate, Nicholas notices BLOOD dripping from his hand... *dead*. Sword still strapped.

He motions the children. They amble out as he removes the sword. The shoreline is right there. Ships rocking gently.

Nicholas scans around -- eyes landing on the wooden pirate *housing section*. He kneels before Clement.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Take the children to that boat. Be very quiet and wait for me inside, can you do that?

CLEMENT
(nods)
But where are you going?

NICHOLAS
I'll be right back. Now, go.

Clement ushers the others to the boats as Nicholas grips his sword and takes quick and quiet strides towards the houses.

EXT. HOUSING SECTIONS - MOMENTS LATER

They resemble ancient barracks composed of stone foundations and wooden roofs with stone hearths rising out of them.

Nicholas spots a GUARD and sneaks around the side. He scales the large haystacks and climbs onto the roofs.

Quietly, he glides across the rooftops. Causing a CREAK here and there.

He stops at a hearth -- offering an opening into one of the chambers. Sword in hand, he climbs down the hole and...

INT. PIRATE CHAMBER - CONTINUOUS

He appears through the stone shaft. Dodging the hanging pots as he looks across to make sure -- BALDASSARE is sleeping. Bags of *gold* lay next to his bed.

His sword TAPS a pot -- a deafening CLANG. On edge, Nicholas looks up as Baldassare groans and shifts.

Sweat beads form, Nicholas quietly pads over to the gold. Just as he reaches to grab them -- BALDASSARE OPENS HIS EYES.

Nicholas CUPS his mouth as he tries to scream! Doing everything he can to restrain him...

But the pirate tries to slip out. His hand reaching for his scimitar, his fingers skimming it, GRASPING it... just as --

SLICE! *Nicholas is forced to shove his sword through him.*

His eyes widen. Nicholas catches on his breath as Baldassare thrashes in throes before dying.

Hit with a rush of shock, Nicholas tries wiping the blood from his hands... *smearing* it... he looks at Baldassare and crosses himself.

Sheathing his sword, he grabs two bags of gold and *tosses them over his shoulder...*

As he climbs back through the hearth and patters across the roof again...

INT. ANOTHER PIRATE CHAMBER - CONTINUOUS

A brazier glows, the shadow belongs to Amado. In bed, awake, worried.

His roof CREAKS with faint footsteps. He furrows his brows, surveys the ceiling and reaches for his scimitar. Just then --

CLANG. A bag of gold falls through the hearth.

Startling him, he slowly rises and slides over to it...

EXT. BOAT - MOMENTS LATER

Nicholas arrives to the boat to see the children anxiously waiting for him. He unties the ropes and lets the boat gently float off before releasing its sail...

INT. AMADO'S CHAMBER - CONTINUOUS

He opens the bag to reveal *gold coins*. Incredulous, he smiles to himself and glances out of his window to the moonlit sea, where amongst the large ships, a small boat rides off...

INT. BOAT - CONTINUOUS

ON Nicholas. Bathed in milky starlight. Blue eyes shimmering with new mettle. KNUCKLING the hilt of his sword...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ESTATE, HOUSE CHURCH - ROME - NIGHT

Father Livius sleeps, a HAND moves over his mouth and keeps him quiet as he wakes in a fright... Nicholas shushes him.

FATHER LIVIUS
(incredulous)
Nicholas... But how...

NICHOLAS
No matter, Livius... Right now I need you to leave this place and sail east with the children.

FATHER LIVIUS
The children?? They're safe??

NICHOLAS
Yes. Go take refuge at Constantine’s camp in Byzantium. I will be a few day’s ride behind you.

FATHER LIVIUS
How far has the word spread?

NICHOLAS
To every corner of the empire. Where have some of the members gone?

FATHER LIVIUS
They’ve left. The Aventine gangs are attacking our cells without reprimands from the guards. Diocletian has been driving us out now that you’ve been gone.

NICHOLAS
Then I should cherish the look on his face even more tomorrow. Do me a favor and have Marcus and Cassius meet me at the stables in the early dawn.

Father Livius flashing him a concerned look while rising.

NICHOLAS (CONT’D)
And one last thing... Emmelia... have you any word?

FATHER LIVIUS
I do. And she is safe, Nicholas. She’s refused to leave Constantine’s camp.

Momentarily rejuvenated, Nicholas turns and marches out. The old priest just notices the SWORD suspended from his belt...

FATHER LIVIUS (CONT’D)
Don’t do anything foolish, Nicholas...

But he’s already gone... and the darkness BLEEDS INTO...

Shots of streets vandalized through the night. All in the theme of *caesar offering gold to those holding crosses...*

And the same picture is drawn on a PARCHMENT, in the hands of a citizen trudging through a --

EXT. ROMAN FORUM - DAY

A MASSIVE CROWD swarmed near the senate house. Glancing at the portico of the senate house. Rosaries are palmed.

A HOODED HORSEMAN tows a wooden carriage full of HAY through them. From under the hood, we can make out Nicholas. Two other HOODS walk alongside the wagon -- Marcus and Cassius.

From the senate building, trumpets BLAST their strident martial anthem as Diocletian bounds out onto the steps with a large flock of CITY MILITIA and CENTURIONS, led by Maximian.

More GUARDS form perimeters around the courtyard but leave large gaps due to the size of the square.

DIOCLETIAN
What is this?

Maximian steps forth, thoroughly about to enjoy this --

MAXIMIAN
Looks like we have our first riot...

Diocletian is piqued, wheels spinning. Mascius steps forward with a PARCHMENT depicting the same picture we saw earlier.

MASCIUS
The word has spread quick through the night. Someone has paid the vandals.

Diocletian, almost sensing it, surveys the sea of people... Nicholas' carriage is lost in there...

NICHOLAS nods to Marcus, who circles the carriage and removes flint and steel. He raises the blade and SMACKS it across the flint -- showering the hay with SPARKS -- igniting, crackling with embers, white SMOKE begins to billow...

DIOCLETIAN sees the plume of SMOKE rising from the crowd... And NICHOLAS removes his hood as Diocletian's eyes narrow...

DIOCLETIAN
Impossible...

Maximian knits his brow, not believing it either... Some of the crowd members recognize him...

CROWD
It's the bishop! He lives! Nicholas lives!!

NICHOLAS removes a parchment from his robe and lifts it high for everyone to see... it's the **Charter of Rights...**

He cranes his arm back and sets it AFIRE over the blazing thicket --

NICHOLAS
Condemn us no more...
(Bellows)
Brothers, sisters! Rome will condemn us no more!

Random SHOUTS of agreement chime out as black ashes swim upwards and Nicholas releases the burning charter.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Dark times have not spared themselves in our city! During which our church has ministered to all those in need... Christians AND Pagans alike... Yet this is how the emperor repays us! Mark my words, a day *will* come when that man no longer worships himself! Yet holds himself committed to the laws and grace of the one true God for the greater good of his city!

An initial shock prevents reaction... but the MOB has been awoken... as their voices want to be heard... igniting an EXPLOSION of energy and cheers that spread like wildfire...

Eyes murderous --

DIOCLETIAN
Bring me his heart.

Maximian SIGNALS his garrison. Steel is drawn with the menacing crunch of boots, the city guards STORM the forum.

Nicholas DROPS the carriage, SNAPS THE REINS and THUNDERS towards the metropolis! Marcus and Cassius have vanished.

Maximian mounts a horse and gives chase with his cavalry. Trampling bystanders. Cutting a swath through the mobs. Pandemonium! Guards nock arrows and TWANG! TWANG! Fire off!

Nicholas' horse swerves, arrows brush him, CLATTERING against stone, piercing bystanders. In his line of sight -- Marcus appears from behind a column and *tosses him a BAG of coins.* Nicholas snatches it midair and BURSTS onto a market street!

Citizens pour out onto balconies and windows to see this rider towing a tidal wave of citizens and guards in his wake.

Pedestrians leap over, beggars watch indifferently. Maximian and his guards BARREL onto the street! Hooves THUNDERING! Nicholas in full-tilt, ROARING past, LEAPING over carts.

But the guards close in, spring out from alleys. Arrows rain down as Nicholas rips a SMALL HOLE in the bag and raises it over his head as *a deluge of GOLD COINS cascades out of it!*

RAINING DOWN onto the busy market street -- *Causing a cacophony of JINGLES as metal splashes onto stone.*

CHAOS ERUPTS! Everybody RUSHES IN to collect! Creating a human blockade as horses rear-up! Guards fly off! Maximian reigns to a grinding halt, horse clawing at the air, watching Nicholas recede. He whips his horse and reroutes.

Nicholas forms a river of gold as people sound off screams of support, even those that don't know him, Vive la revolution!

Directly in front -- guards heave two large carts into the street and with an unflinching gait, Nicholas' horse climbs a stack of crates and SPRINGS OFF its hind legs...

SAILING OVER the blockade with the last coin falling out. Everyone cranes their heads with the flying horse...

As he makes the landing and charges towards the impoverished districts. Guards not too far off his tail.

EXT. IMPOVERISHED DISTRICT - MOMENTS LATER

Nicholas dismounts and BURSTS into a jumble of buildings. Maximian and his guards close in from all sides.

INSIDE BUILDING, Nicholas winds through a maze of corridors and barrels down a flight of stairs... darkness approaches... he SNATCHES a torch and disappears into the shadows --

CATACOMBS, Nicholas charges through the labyrinth with memorized tact, vanishing into the bowels of the underworld.

As Maximian and his men storm the catacombs, GRIND to a halt, and survey the multitude of tunnels. The brute PUNCHES a wall, chiseling off stone and drawing BLOOD. He stomps out.

MAXIMIAN
Send outriders! Find him!

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE, DIOCLETIAN'S BEDCHAMBER - NIGHT

Diocletian's eyes swim with venom, staring out over his balustrades. Hearing pockets of rebellion, fleeting screams. A women's HAND slides over his shoulder...

PRISCA
You musn't react irrationally... please...

He meets her gaze -- completely unhinged and working to contain his temper. She drops her eyes as he MARCHES past...

INT. TEMPLE OF THE ORACLES - NIGHT

The sybils are BATHED in the mutilated lamb's blood, CHANTING, eyes rolled back. The ceremony culminating...

Diocletian paces, awaiting a verdict as the chanting grows LOUDER. Then their eyes SNAP BACK, they fall silent -- As one of them delivers the sentence with three chilling words --

SYBIL
Kill them all.

Diocletian looks up. Overcome by complete darkness -- *as a thousand raucous voices leaks in atop his howling speech...*

DIOCLETIAN (V.O.)
You have suffered as I have suffered!

EXT. ROMAN FORUM - DAY

Large gray skies hang over the Imperial City. Diocletian stands atop the steps of the imposing Temple of Vesta to an enormous crowd, in full propaganda tenor --

DIOCLETIAN
A reign burdened with a failed Tetrarchy, a collapsed economy, and a dying city!! Why you ask?? Why have the gods forsaken us?? My children, I have inquired and I have heard! We have brought it upon ourselves by choosing to forsake them first!

People's faces are injected with fear.

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
For too long have we expelled them from our homes and invited the Christians into our hearts! For too long have we allowed them to deny our gods and wreak havoc upon our once great city!

Angry voices begin to murmur.

DIOCLETIAN (CONT'D)
It is time, my children! It is time we offer the gods a sacrifice they will cherish with everlasting gratitude! So I say to you... Let the games begin!

Bellicose VOICES wail! As we PULL UP over their heads, rise above the Forum and find ourselves SOARING into the COLISEUM! And the CHEERING proliferates into twenty thousand spectators roaring at the savagery about to unfold in the arena --

CHRISTIANS -- men, women, children. Scrambling. Holding children up as a mercy plea. None is shown.

DIOCLETIAN sits in his Imperial Box fifteen feet above the arena floor. Maximian and Praetorian archers flanking him.

A terrified GROUP kneels around a standing PRIEST. Uselessly shielding children as METAL DOORS in the ground slide open and the LIONS spring out. The crowd goes wild. The growling beasts spot the fresh meat and charge towards the humans --

WE CUT to the spectators convulse with CHEERS! The menacing voices haunting the face of...

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE, ROME - DAY

NICHOLAS. As if he can hear them from a thousand furlongs away. He, Marcus, and Cassius have a band of villagers in tow. Receding from their abandoned village in the distance.

In a carriage, a MOTHER comforts her children by singing a soft tune that hauntingly reverberates through our montage... As we SOAR back *and the images of destruction burn in...*

Of villages being laid to ruin by MILITIAS. Heavy cavalries slicing down STEEL, dragging screaming women into tents. Thatched huts BURN wildly, SMOKE surges into the air, corpses are being MOUNDED into piles... flies buzzing overhead...

Another village lay SMOLDERING... corpses impaled on spikes, crows peck at their eyes... The human skewers silhouetted against the crimson sky...

EXT. ESTATE, HOUSE CHURCH - ROME - DAY

Under a fiery sky, MOBS ransack the estate. Crucifixes and scriptures are BURNED. A clergyman is beaten to a pulp. While mounted GUARDS grip torches and on Maximian's signal -- they ARC them through the air and set the estate ABLAZE.

And the bloodshed continues... as Diocletian signs additional edicts to continue the GREAT PERSECUTION across the empire...

... While Prisca cries in her bedroom and charges the door to leave, but the stationed GUARDS restrain her...

... Christians are hung in the courtyards, others slain in gladiatorial arenas...

As the MOTHER'S SINGING dies out and the colors bleed into...

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - PRIVATE COURTYARDS/GARDENS - NIGHT

Diocletian's eyes, casting a ghostly gaze upon his own statue, overlooking a darkened Rome in a state of disarray. Maximian stands nearby.

DIOCLETIAN
I defeated the Sarmatians and Carpi. Sacked Ctesiphon and negotiated a lasting peace with the Sassanid Persians... But what will I be remembered by? This. The Great Diocletianic Persecution as they have so humbly named it. This is to be my legacy, Maximian.

MAXIMIAN
History is written by the victor, caesar. Our legacy will be written by the Rome we salvaged.
(off Diocletian's look)
Now, let us not leave this matter to the hands of lousy scribes.

The emperor's eyes harden into obsidian glass, set on finishing what he started.

EXT. FORTIFIED WAR CAMP - BYZANTIUM - DUSK

LOOKOUT TOWERS sit high under a scarlet sky. Stationed GUARDS spot a herd of villagers trudging towards camp pulling mules, led by a horseman. They shout down below --

GUARDS
Outrider approaching!

MOMENTS LATER, Constantine and his officers march out with Emmelia and Father Livius. Their eyes imbued with weathered glee at the sight of Nicholas, leading the villagers ahorse.

Emmelia runs out and throws her arms around him. *At closer look* -- his eyes lay in agony. He wraps his arms around her tightly, holding in one hand parchments depicting the persecution: coliseum victims, hanging men, ravaged villages.

She pulls back and notices the parchments, having already heard, looks back into his eyes.

EMMELIA
Do not blame yourself, Nicholas.
You can not blame yourself.

The words drift past him as she holds his face and meets his gaze... breaking her heart... she leans in and softly kisses him. His reaction is reserved, his grief slightly pacified.

Constantine steps up, offers his hand. Nicholas looks up and considers the gravity of this handshake, an official call to arms. *But he TAKES his forearm* and Constantine pulls him in --

CONSTANTINE
I will kill him. I promise you.

Nicholas still not too thrilled at the prospect.

NICHOLAS
The west was hit the worst. We
reached some villages before the
battalions arrived.

Constantine looks past his shoulder to the hungry, desperate villagers. Marcus and Cassius are amongst them.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
These people need food and
protection, Constantine.

CONSTANTINE
Of course. They are not the first
ones to have come.

Constantine motions, his men usher the villagers into camp.

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
Meet me in my tent when you are rested, Nicholas.

Constantine leaves with his officers. Father Livius approaches.

NICHOLAS
Livius... are the children safe?

The priest rests a hand on his shoulder, happy to see him, assuring him they are.

INT. SMALL COMMUNE IN THE CAMP - NIGHT

Host to other villagers who have taken refuge here. Fires dance in braziers with the night wind. Meager tents are scattered, porridge is heated and stirred atop camp flames. Children frolic about, amongst them are the five ORPHANS.

From the distance, Nicholas, Father Livius, and Emmelia approach the commune and into the orange glow of the fires...

Upon spotting Nicholas, the orphans' eyes light up! They RUN over, swarm him, jump into his arms, yell his name. His angst is breached for a moment as *Nicholas laughs delightfully*.

NICHOLAS
My children... let me see your faces...
(he kneels)
You look healthy and strong again. Are you eating well?

They nod. He feels Junius' muscles...

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
I'd like to see those pirates try and take you again!

CLEMENT
Feel *my* arms, sir Nicholas!!

ALBA
No mine!

Nicholas feels their muscles, feigns marvel and laughs as the OTHER CHILDREN slowly approach and watch reverently. Nicholas notices. Clement pulls out an origami bird --

CLEMENT
Look, Nicholas! I made it! By myself!

He pulls the tail-end to assure it works as the wings flap.

NICHOLAS
I see you have been practicing your skill.
(off Clement's proud look)
But have you been practicing the other part I taught you?

Unsure of the reference, he follows Nicholas' eyes to the other children and realizes. He offers a nod though, fibbing.

Off Nicholas' look, Father Livius gives a shake of the head. Nicholas looks back at Clement, who knows he's been caught.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
I will always know who's been practicing their good deeds...
(surveys all the children)
That goes for all of you now... you hear?

They nod -- sheepish, excited. Nicholas looks at Clement, who turns back and hands his toy over to another boy. Nicholas musses his hair, scoops up two of the children into his large arms and walks towards the camp fires and porridge pots.

Emmelia watches, falling ever more in love with him. Father Livius catches her as she tries to curb her blush.

INT. IMPERIAL TENT - CAMP - NIGHT

Flickering braziers provide the only light in the enormous tent. Heavy beams support the canopy and they creak like the timbers of a ship as the tent sways slightly in the wind.

Constantine leans over a large WAR MAP, ambitious and tactical. Centurions and advisors accompany him.

Nicholas enters. Constantine looks up, pleased, but Nicholas still disconnected from it all, from the looming war.

CONSTANTINE
Nicholas... meet my first spear centurions -- Flavius Castus, Petronius, and Alexander of Bythnia. Centurions, this is Nicholas of Myra.

Stern nods are exchanged.

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
My friend, we've amassed our five legions. Now, the fate of this war rests on the alliance with the Armenian Kingdom.

PETRONIUS
Sir, King Tiridates fought with my father against the Sassanid Persians, allow me to coordinate an alliance council...

CONSTANTINE
Futile Petronius; although the mad king would want nothing more than to decapitate Diocletian, HE no longer commands their armies. As a Christian state, supreme power now lies with the official head of their church -- patron Gregory the Illuminator.

Constantine allows the magnitude of this to sink in with everyone. He looks back at Nicholas as a cue...

NICHOLAS
(to the men)
He was my teacher.

The centurions concerned. Constantine approaches Nicholas.

CONSTANTINE
Unite us, Nicholas. Let us bring a new age to Rome. Let us make history together.

Nicholas holds Constantine's gaze -- his contemplative blue eyes still studying Constantine, still wary. Tormented by the declaration of war resting on his shoulders.

NICHOLAS
I already have.

Constantine left speechless. The centurions as well.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
I dispatched a messenger to Gregory when I left Rome. You will have your war, Constantine.

Constantine rests his hands on Nicholas' shoulders in thanks.

CONSTANTINE
We will have our war, Nicholas.
Thank you.

Nicholas tries to reciprocate the enthusiasm but falls short as he turns and makes his exit. Leaving Constantine slightly dampened over his doubts.

EXT. FORTIFIED CAMP - NIGHT

Around the tents, scattered camp fires send embers swimming up into the night sky. Music and dancing can be heard as Nicholas and Emmelia walk together.

EMMELIA
There is hope amongst them again.

Nicholas softly nods, gazing at the distant festivities. She appraises his pensive eyes.

EMMELIA (CONT'D)
You're doing the right thing, you know. Offering Constantine a chance to bring real change to Rome.

NICHOLAS
I trust your judgement.

EMMELIA
And I thought you priests were supposed to be the prudent ones...

NICHOLAS
A priest maybe. A bishop...

A subtle grin pinches at his ears, hers too. A crisp breeze sends a shiver through her as he removes his cloak and lays it across her shoulders. Leaving him in a sleeveless tunic. She looks at his mutilated SPQR tattoo.

EMMELIA
We can not always outrun the echoes of our past, Nicholas.

He looks over as they walk, her eyes inviting him in. The grim memories come back to him...

NICHOLAS
The civil wars spared no man or boy capable of fighting. We saw what they did to those who wouldn't, the Christians. The garrisons took us and thousands died in that siege.
(MORE)

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
But when the smoke cleared... better I had died too. Insubordination landed the prisoners on the chopping block but not all were lucky enough to have a quick death. It was against the law to strike a fourth time if the first three were unsuccessful. My disapproval of the gratuitous orders landed me in prison as well, earning me the duty of putting those poor men out of their misery.

Nicholas becomes increasingly vulnerable, he is sharing the deepest part of himself.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
A misery I was prepared to relieve myself of... until a complete stranger managed to change that. He was a missionary named Gregory, a man so altruistic he was willing to give his life at the helm of those soldiers just to spare mine. It was the most profound thing I had ever seen. He taught me the word of his faith, offered me a second chance and I embraced his teachings in full earnest from there on. Knowing someday... that this faith is precisely what will give Rome its second chance.

They arrive at a tent. Emmelia slides the cloak back around his shoulders. She looks up into his eyes with reverence and takes his face into her hands.

EMMELIA
Nicholas of Myra. Your life will bare many stories. Inspiring tales for those in need of something as simple as hope.

She looks inwards a moment, remembering she too was there.

He takes her hands into his large palms. She looks up. They hold each other's gaze in a manner that embodies everything that is pure about love.

She wants to kiss him again but respects his binding covenant, he shares the feeling as he gazes down at her hand. Eyes roving over her ring finger...

As he reaches up and snags a piece of lint off his cloak -- *and ties it around her finger.* She glows.

MARCUS/CASSIUS (O.S.)
Nicholas! Emmelia! Come have a little fun you two!
(they look over)
It's not good to tell stories just before a war! You tell them after!

Invited over to the festivities, Nicholas takes her hand and they join the others dancing around the blazing camp fires.

EXT. MYRA - ESTABLISHING - NIGHT

We're back in Myra on this cloudy night, on the shores of the Mediterranean. A Roman Galley docks quietly at the harbor.

Roman soldiers cross down the plank, torches WHOOSHING, trailed by the heavy footsteps of MAXIMIAN.

EXT. MYRA, NICHOLAS' VILLAGE - NIGHT

The village folk are gathered under the same pavilion for dinner and socializing. FATHER AERIUS, the old priest from the beginning sits at the head of the table.

Then from beyond the hill -- TORCHES appear with the silhouettes of a Roman battalion and the chilling SOUNDS of heavy armor clanging with the canter of their horses.

Father Aerius perks up in fear. The remaining villagers turn their heads as a state of panic starts to course through.

MAXIMIAN sits high on his horse, Praetorian helmet fastened.

MAXIMIAN
Burn it. Bring me the priest.

An ugly scene unfolds as the soldiers mercilessly attack the defenseless villagers. SCREAMS short-lived, children taken, fleeing villagers chased down. The soldiers toss their torches onto the pavilion setting it AFIRE.

They drag Father Aerius to Maximian and stand him up.

FATHER AERIUS
Please... have mercy on the children... I beg of you...

Maximian relishes the next two words he's been waiting to deliver --

MAXIMIAN
Crucify him.

The soldiers DRAG him away as another cohort brings over a terrified teenage BOY. Maximian dismounts and grabs the reins of another horse; Pulls it over, towering over him --

MAXIMIAN (CONT'D)
Can you ride, boy?
(boy nods)
Ride north to Byzantium and find Bishop Nicholas. He'll be cowering at the fortified camps of Flavius Aurelius Constantinus. Tell him his village burns to ashes.
(boy too scared to move)
NOW!!!

Everyone flinches. Maximian HEAVES the boy atop the horse, SLAPS its rump and it plunges into the distant darkness.

EXT. FORTIFIED WAR CAMP - BYZANTIUM - MORNING

It rains lightly over the camp, thunderclaps peal across the gray skies, mud puddles form. An OUTRIDER approaches the lookout towers... the boy from Myra.

INT. NICHOLAS' TENT - MORNING

Raindrops patter against the tent as Nicholas sleeps. Eyes roving under his lids, troubled. Maybe in the same dream.

His tent flap is pulled aside to reveal a GUARD and the soaked Boy. He tentatively approaches.

BOY
Sir Nicholas...

Nicholas opens his eyes and tries REACHING for a sword in a rattled stupor (similar to the futile attempts at grabbing the sword in his dream).

BOY (CONT'D)
Sir Nicholas, I come from Myra...

Nicholas braces himself, looks at the boy --

BOY (CONT'D)
They've sacked the village, sir.

He is instantly on his feet and storms out of the tent.

OUTSIDE, Constantine approaches with a few officers, throwing on his robe and clasping on his wrist cuffs.

CONSTANTINE
I just heard. I'm coming with you.

Nicholas walks past him towards the distant stables.

NICHOLAS
Don't always sound so pleased with yourself, Constantine.

CONSTANTINE
This is just your hate speaking, Nicholas!
(Nicholas ignores)
This is no time to be cavalier!

Nicholas whips around.

NICHOLAS
I have asked thousands to spill blood in YOUR name and yet you find the audacity to label ME cavalier?!

CONSTANTINE
We have all spilled blood, Nicholas...

NICHOLAS
No! You will NEVER understand the suffering we've endured under the hands of Romans, Constantine! Never!

People have stepped out of their tents due to the ruckus. They stand stunned, never having seen Nicholas lose his temper and poise in such fashion. Emmelia is amongst them.

CONSTANTINE
My father was killed before my own eyes by one, Nicholas. I do know. And my mother was martyred by them as well.
(this stops Nicholas)
Helen of Bythnia. She was a Christian, Nicholas. Slain by the same people whom I wish to drive out of this wretched empire once and for all.

Nicholas studies Constantine as he always has, finally coming out with it --

NICHOLAS
What are you, Constantine? A politician? A soldier? A secret Christian? A pagan? What sort of solidarity are you to bring to Rome?? I am sorry but you are just as lost as every other soul here.

This crushes Emmelia. Nicholas sees it, hating himself. And maybe he was just speaking about himself.

CONSTANTINE
And you are not the only righteous man left in this world, bishop. Go tend to your village but you ARE under my command if you wish your people here to be protected. So... you will take my men with you for protection and you WILL march back with the army you have promised me.

Nicholas marches off, too ashamed to speak to Emmelia as he passes her. Constantine signals some soldiers to go with him.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE - ASIA MINOR - DAY

Nicholas and a battalion race through the rolling countryside now moistened by the torrent of rain.

EXT. MYRA, NICHOLAS' VILLAGE - DAY

Nicholas and the battalion trot into a charred and smoking ruin that was once his village.

He surveys the detritus left by Diocletian's men. The church, the pavilion, the homes... destroyed. Buzzards circle. Bodies left out in the rain, blood washing into the mud. We see the young female orphan from the beginning amongst them.

Nicholas is overcome with unspeakable grief. Then his face turns to stone when his eyes land on the pair of outstretched arms tied at the elbows and nailed to a crossbar -- belonging to Father Aerius, who has been savagely crucified.

His world implodes --

NICHOLAS
No. God no...

He dismounts and plods over. Thunder echoing across the gray skies... He arrives at the cross and looks up at the old priest. The rain pelting his anguished face.

As he tilts his head further up and in a hauntingly aching tone that can only suggest he's losing his grip on hope --

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Why have you abandoned me??

A silent response. And a different sensation begins to stew within him... atop the austere sounds of the rain storm... and the devastation on his face says it all. Realizing it's done. It is complete. He has lost his faith.

The sobering feeling courses through his bones as he grips his cross and YANKS it off. Allowing it to slide out of his palm and settle into the mud. Sinking with the washing rain.

Then, atop the drumming rain shower... THWANG! THWANG! Sharp shrill sounds pierce the air as Nicholas turns his head to see ARROWS whizzing directly at the battalion soldiers! Soldiers start to die as the rest draw their blades --

SOLDIER
Prepare to fight!

Then from every charred hut and behind every tree Maximian's SOLDIERS storm the battalion. A bloody fight ensues. The outnumbered battalion does their best to hold their ground.

Nicholas' red-rimmed eyes only fill with more fury as he SNATCHES a fallen sword.

Using his size, he PLOWS through soldiers who attack him. His swings, punches, screams coming from the darkest of places. The enemies blood splattering across this broken man's face.

IN THE DISTANCE, Maximian watches. He snatches up his large shield and marches towards the fray.

The battalion is slaughtered as Nicholas continues to swing away, surrounded, desperate, inviting them to kill him...

NICHOLAS
Come on! What are you waiting for?!

He spins around with heaving lungs and wild eyes... And eventually meets Maximian's SHIELD -- CLOBBER HIM across his face. Flooring him. Rendering him unconscious... Going BLACK.

...And we fade back into his dream. BURNING IN AND OUT of real images taking place with the fluttering of his eyes...

...Dream... Nicholas follows the children into the hut and finds himself on the battlefield again, where he spots the sword and the encroaching dark horseman.

...Real... Nicholas is carried onto Maximian's galley.

...Dream... Nicholas is able to pick up the sword this time.

...Real... Maximian YELLS orders as their ship is attacked.

...Dream... Nicholas DEFLECTS the horseman's sword.

...Real... Swords clash on Maximian's galley between his soldiers and a band of eclectically dressed men -- *pirates.*

...Dream... Nicholas cuts down the horseman and fights his way through the battlefield, where a WHITE LIGHT glimmers in the distance.

...Real... Maximian's soldiers are overrun by the outnumbering pirates.

...Dream... Nicholas runs through the fray towards the distant light... where he spots the children again.

...Real... Maximian and his officers are held at knife-point.

...Dream... The white light grows BRIGHTER as Nicholas gets closer... the children waiting for him.

...Real... Nicholas is carried off the galley by the pirates.

...Dream... Nicholas drops his sword when he arrives at the radiant light as his anguished eyes are invaded by serenity... He walks into the light with the children.

...Real... A gourd of water is brought to Nicholas' mouth... he drinks, coughs, opens his eyes... looking up at the face of a man silhouetted against the sky... recognizing him...

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Amado?

AMADO
My friend, it is good to see you again.

We hear soft waves, his ship gently rocks. Amado helps Nicholas sit up, surrounded by a throng of pirates watching.

NICHOLAS
What's happened? How did you...

AMADO
Let us just say you are lucky we are masters of the sea. Or then again, maybe it was not luck.

NICHOLAS
(trying to remember)
I was taken... on a ship...
Maximian's ship...

AMADO
The Romans are long gone now. We offered a truce, we spare their lives in exchange for yours. But you will meet them again, do not worry.

NICHOLAS
(in disbelief)
How did you even find me?

Amado looks back as a veiled woman comes forward... she removes her veil to reveal PRISCA.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Empress...

PRISCA
Hello Nicholas.

Nicholas rises to his feet, still incredulous, she studies his eyes. Speaks with poise and grace.

PRISCA (CONT'D)
Do not lose your faith, Nicholas. I have witnessed what you are capable of and I implore you... do not lose your faith in Rome either. Armies have waged endless battles and emperors have come and gone but true change will to have to start here...

She exposes the rosary in her hand...

PRISCA (CONT'D)
So I ask you to raise you sword one last time and fight for it. Fight for the future Rome rightfully deserves.

He looks down for a moment... reinforced with glimmers of hope... as he meets her gaze and offers a nod.

His eyes look out to sea, where land appears at the intersection of sea and sky. He steps across the deck...

NICHOLAS
Myra?

Amado appears at his side, silently reassuring him it is and gazing out with him.

Nicholas' hope becoming fully restored, he glances over at Amado and almost believes him to be his guardian angel.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Thank you, Amado.

Amado simply smiles, PATS him on the back and saunters off. Nicholas looks back towards Myra...

EXT. MYRA, NICHOLAS' VILLAGE - DAY

Nicholas and his friends trek through the destroyed village. The pirates help carry bodies towards the cemetery. He approaches his old stone house with a purposeful gait, lying in half ruin, and enters...

INT. NICHOLAS' HOME - CONTINUOUS

Nicholas walks over to the hearth. Starts rummaging through the charred rubble... as a GLINT peaks through.

He scrapes aside the rest to reveal a sword HILT, still sheathed in its scabbard. It's the old Dutch man's sword.

He picks it up and rises. Sentiments rushing through him as he unsheathes the sword and sees *his image* in the polished metal over the same engraving we saw before... **KLAAS.**

NICHOLAS (V.O.)
Father of all, we pray for those
whom we love but see no longer...

EXT. MYRA, NICHOLAS' VILLAGE - CEMETERY - DAY

Amado, Prisca, and some of the pirate band stand over the multitude of burial mounds as Nicholas offers prayer.

NICHOLAS
...Grant them your peace and let
light perpetually shine upon them.
In nomine Patris, et Filii, et
Spiritus Sancti. Amen.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SHORES OF MYRA - DAY

Post rainstorm HUES brush the sky and a soft sea surf washes onto the sandy shores. Mist wafts through the golden air as a pack of impressive HORSES are carried off the pirate ship onto shore.

In the distance -- Prisca steps onto a wagon and before climbing in, she exchanges one last look with Nicholas.

AMADO brings over a noble white stallion to Nicholas.

AMADO
The finest horses in all of Rome, my friend. The Spanish stallions of Andalusians de Mythos. I named this one *Preacher*.

Amado grins at his own quip. Nicholas takes the reins and pets the steed on its neck.

NICHOLAS
A preacher that does not speak...

AMADO
Fascinating, no?

Nicholas laughs.

NICHOLAS
Yes, I am sure the Romans would love him.

Nicholas mounts Preacher. Amado mounts his stallion.

AMADO
We ride north?

NICHOLAS
Northeast. To intercept a friend... I have a promise to keep.

AMADO
Your friend can you meet you in Byzantium. We will never catch him in time, even with these horses.

NICHOLAS
He is marching three legions strong. We have plenty of time.

Amado’s face nearly drops. Nicholas’ lip curls, PATS Amado on the back and SPURS his horse. Kicking up the moist sand as he rides off along the shoreline.

Amado shakes his head, sounds a strange WHISTLE and his stallion takes off after Nicholas. The two horses dashing across the beach PROLIFERATE INTO...

EXT. FORTIFIED WAR CAMP - BYZANTIUM - DAY

A heavy CAVALRY trotting across the vast field with TWELVE THOUSAND SOLDIERS in tow.

In the front lines are Nicholas, Amado and KING TIRIDATES III. A large regal man with a feral overgrowth on his face and a gilded CROWN resting atop his head.

A stately WAGON is pulled directly behind them.

EXT. IMPERIAL TENT - CAMP - DAY

The FOOTPATH leading into the large network of tents is bound in hardened mud. Glittering in the sunshine. Soldiers are lined up watching Nicholas and the caravan arrive.

A silent air pervades as Constantine walks out of the massive tent to receive them. His burdened face offered the first signs of solace. His officers stand behind him.

Nicholas, Amado, and Tiridates dismount. The wagon door is opened by an officer and out steps GREGORY THE ILLUMINATOR. A sage-like man in his fifties with a long silver beard. Draped in a golden stole, a brocade emblazoned with crosses, and a tall golden mitre (bishop's hat).

The four men approach Constantine. Nicholas is first to step forward, silent amends are offered.

CONSTANTINE
Quite the entrance.

Nicholas GRASPS his forearm.

NICHOLAS
Your men were ambushed, stood no chance. They died bravely.

CONSTANTINE
I suppose you slid by with more than just chance then.

NICHOLAS
A pirate actually.
(gesturing back)
And a dear friend -- Amado.

AMADO
Sir.

CONSTANTINE
I offer you my gratitude, Amado.

NICHOLAS
Constantine... the king of Armenia Tiridates the third.

Tiridates steps forth.

CONSTANTINE
King Tiridates. Your presence is much welcome.

TIRIDATES
If my presence means Diocletian's head on a stake, then I will drink to it now! Right here!

Constantine signals, men rush over wine. Gregory shakes his head at his king and Tiridates frowns, almost child-like.

NICHOLAS
And it is my utmost pleasure to introduce to you Patriarch Gregory the Illuminator.

Gregory steps forward.

GREGORY
So you are to be the next emperor of Rome? Your ambition earns my blessing, son.
(beat)
But we must remember... that it is in the darkest of hours that we begin to listen, Constantine. And if we listen hard enough we begin to hear... we begin to hear something that ambition cannot exist without... faith. And it is only then that our actions emulate our conscience. Rome is listening, son. Make it hear. Save your empire before it is too late.

CONSTANTINE
Archbishop Gregory, my entire life I have listened. And my entire life I have failed to hear the faith you speak of.
(MORE)

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
I have only known Rome, I have only cared for its political glory. Yet if I am to be Rome, it is only proper that I truly understand the darkness that has consumed it. I thought I did...
(gazes over at Nicholas)
But I realized I am just as confused and divided as the empire itself.

Gregory's old eyes look pleased.

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
Nicholas... by the hands of your grace baptize me. Baptize me and I shall march onto that battlefield with every shield and standard marked with the monogram of Christ. No longer will our legions carry high the idolatrous standards worshipping the *man* whom they die for. But rather a Standard of the Cross, fighting under the one and only God whom I now hear. Nicholas... not only will I offer Peace of the Church and legalize your faith... but I will march into Rome as its first Christian emperor.

The magnitude riddles through the tent city, his soldiers stand slack-jawed, Nicholas takes a moment to register this.

In the midst of his thought he sees *Emmelia* wading through the amassed soldiers. She stops, holds his gaze... stirring a tender moment, wordlessly conveying that she forgives him.

He recognizes it, sees the lint still on her finger and cherishes her face... before looking back to Constantine and offering a nod that will change history...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. IMPERIAL TENT - DAY

Constantine kneels amongst a select audience including King Tiridates, Gregory, Father Livius, and his officers. Shirtless and head hung as --

Nicholas, clad in his red stole once again, brings over a golden chalice and ceremoniously pours the water over his head three times. Wording the phrases, administering the holy sacrament...

EXT. IMPERIAL TENT - DAY

The tent flap is pulled aside as Constantine WALKS OUT... and the soldiers lined up along the footpath RAISE THEIR SWORDS --

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. OLIVE GROVE, OUTSKIRTS OF THE CAMP - DUSK

Strands of green ivy sway from one of the old robust trees common in these lands of Ancient Greece. Its gnarled trunk bringing its own sense of natural beauty to the wedding ceremony, accompanied by a private audience --

The orphans hold wreaths of white carnations and lilies alongside Father Livius. Constantine stands as witness.

Emmelia is draped in a white one-piece woven tunic. Her hand lifted towards Gregory and bound to Nicholas' by a woven strip of cloth as the archbishop intones the holy phrases...

And the sun begins to sink as the moon moves over the scarlet sky. Bathing milky starlight over Nicholas and Emmelia, now alone, hand in hand, under the olive tree.

NICHOLAS
If I die, I want to die knowing...

She leans in and KISSES HIM. Not letting him finish. And in the shelter of the grove is where they make love and spend their honeymoon... embraced in each other's arms.

And the sun rises beyond the horizon. Casting LONG SHADOWS off the slew of gnarled branches... as the hundreds of shadows become those of men...

EXT. VALLEY OF THE MARGUS RIVER - DAWN

Thousands... tens of thousands... as we RISE over a sea of ROMAN SOLDIERS marching in formation. Shaking the earth beneath their feet. Every single shield emblazoned with a *Chi-Rho* (superimposed X and P) symbol on it.

Cresting the large hill towards the valleys. Tall LABARUMS (flag suspended from cross bar) also with the Chi-Rho are held high in place of the traditional Roman standards.

In the front line on horseback is Nicholas, Constantine, Tiridates, Gregory and the centurions. Our Bishop donning full Roman soldier regalia now. Hair long, beard grown out. Mounted atop Preacher, his white stallion.

CONSTANTINE
(to Nicholas)
--You're certain your friend can be trusted?

NICHOLAS
For the third time, yes.

Nicholas takes friendly enjoyment from Constantine's anxious face. Gregory and Tiridates glance at each other confusedly. Constantine registers Nicholas' look.

CONSTANTINE
Don't look *too* jolly, Nicholas... Or I may just leave his holiness alone out there with those hungry Romans.

NICHOLAS
I see that holy water I poured over your head had no effect on your hubris.

Constantine laughs. Nicholas can't help but shake his head with a good-for-nothing smile.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Next thing you know, you change the capital city to your name... city of Constantine.

Constantine actually ponders this...

CONSTANTINE
Constantinople... sounds rather silly actually.

They finally crest the hill, which opens up a view onto the expansive valley along the river Margus... and we see what Constantine was worried about...

A FLEET OF THIRTY GALLEYS of the Imperial Navy approach from the distance.

They look across the vast field to an ARMY of equal size.

Vexillums flapping in the wind. Golden standards bearing Diocletian's face raised alongside the Eagle. Heavy cavalry. Horses pawing the ground, ready to charge.

DIOCLETIAN AND MAXIMIAN in the front lines with their respective centurions and generals. Diocletian looks at the distant ships and back to Constantine's army. He huffs --

DIOCLETIAN
I was actually hoping for a decent fight.

TIRIDATES regards the opposing army then the ships...

TIRIDATES
I must have not spared myself any of the wine last night! Things appear more than they are!!

He laughs like a madman, Gregory shakes his head as the others join the laughter. Unlike the SOLDIERS though, who seem daunted when they notice their disadvantage in numbers.

The army arrives to a HALT. Silence. A whistling breeze. The emerging sun forming a brilliant sea of GLEAMING armor. Constantine registers their faces, glances back to Nicholas.

CONSTANTINE
A few words, bishop?

Nicholas rides forward and trots along the front lines. Surveying their doubtful faces.

SOLDIER
You would think Constantine would have accounted for the navy.

SOLDIER 2
If those ships land, there will be no battle. Only bloodbath.

Flags flap gently. Horses paw. Shuffling armor.

NICHOLAS
I know you are all wondering what I can possibly say to you right now to assure you that our fate is not doomed. Well, soldiers... I am done preaching.
(off soldiers' looks)
It is said we live by faith and not by sight. Brothers, this once I invite you to behold the contrary.

The soldiers look confused as Nicholas gestures towards the sea. WE SOAR along the wave of heads turning...

Continue across the valley... over the sea... onto a GALLEY in the front lines of the fleet... sweeping over the main deck of soldiers and into the bowels of the ship...

INT. BOWELS OF THE GALLEY - CONTINUOUS

WE MOVE with the back of a SOLDIER marching past the 120 bodies propelling the vessel with the tempo of a drummer.

The soldier enters the SUPPLY ROOM -- removes flint and steel and WHOOSH! Sparks a FLAME, sets the room ablaze, and marches out revealing *Amado's grinning face.*

A SERIES OF SHOTS shows the same act performed on other front line galleys by Amado's pirate band disguised as soldiers...

EXT. VALLEY OF THE MARGUS RIVER - MORNING

WE SWEEP across the soldiers watching with disbelief... the sounds of roaring BLAZES and SCREAMING filters in... and WE REVERSE on -- ten of the front line galleys are SCORCHED!

Flames SWIRL up masts, they come CRASHING down! Soldiers jump ship as they begin to CAPSIZE! *Causing a pile up in the sea* and blocking the other ships from reaching shore.

THE SOLDIERS are thunderstruck. Looking back at Nicholas like he just performed a miracle.

NICHOLAS AND CONSTANTINE nod to one another knowingly -- *your turn.* Constantine charges forward and starts firing off commands to the restored soldiers.

DIOCLETIAN AND MAXIMIAN can't believe their eyes either.

DIOCLETIAN
Destroy them.

Maximian ROARS out with his horse shouting orders as massive ONAGERS or Roman catapults are wheeled forward and loaded up with enormous rounded terra cotta FIRE POTS.

CONSTANTINE yells to his elite centuria --

CONSTANTINE
Prepare the scorpions! Make them redirect their onagers!

The artillery battery is wheeled out revealing large SCORPIONS. Six-foot, wheeled crossbows, capable of punching through stone. FIFTY of them are rolled out and pointed at the enemies cavalry lines. Giant bowstrings CREAK.

MAXIMIAN narrows his eyes --

MAXIMIAN
Set alight the stones! Fire the second wave at the artillery!!

CENTURION
Fire the onagers!!

The mighty catapults are released! Hell swallows the skies as a murderous barrage of fireballs LAUNCH INTO THE AIR and arc down onto the opposing reserves. Fire pots SHATTER -- pitch SPLASHES everywhere -- the conflagration sending shimmering heat waves into the sky amongst the screaming forces!

MAXIMIAN
For Rome!!

Maximian and Diocletian lead the cavalry in a full on charge!

CONSTANTINE
Fire the scorpions!!

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG! Down the line, firing pins are released-- As fifty spear-sized bolts TORPEDO through the air...

MAXIMIAN'S CAVALRY

They hear the whistling of the bolts as death rains down on them and SLICE! SLICE! SLICE! Riders are dislodged! Launched twenty feet back! Skewered, impaled, horses crashing...

More fire pots EXPLODE over sections of the scorpions!

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
Brothers! For Rome!!

Steel is RIPPED from scabbards. Nicholas unsheathes -- flashing a glimpse of the KLAAS engraving.

Constantine, Tiridates, and Nicholas spur their mounts forward and BARREL AHEAD with the calvary! The infantry storms the field!

HOOVES THUNDER THE EARTH. Roman cavalry versus Roman cavalry. Chi-Rho versus The Eagle. The INFANTRIES roaring behind them like two tsunamis.

Maximian WAILS. Constantine holds out two swords, samurai style.

Full tilt. Accelerating. And -- CLASH!!! The two forces COLLIDE! *The battle begins.*

Maximian FLATTENS *anything* in his way. Like rock cutting through surf. CRACKING armor plates. Bones CRUNCHING.

CONSTANTINE slices through two at a time. His death blows nearly imperceptible as enemies just seem to fall around him. He locks eyes with Maximian, they CHARGE at one another.

Nicholas uses brute strength as he HEAVES his sword, launching soldiers off their saddles. He sees Constantine and Maximian honing in on each other. HYAH! He reroutes!

Maximian sits a foot higher than Constantine as they close in. But Constantine times it and HEAVES his sword causing the massive man to have to duck -- giving him a window to...

SLICE! But Maximian stabs the horse and VROOM! Sends Constantine flying off and CRASHING into a bloody heap.

Maximian grinds his horse to a halt and regards the slice across his stomach. He scowls and spots Constantine on all fours. He trots over and RAISES HIS GREATSWORD -- but...

Nicholas intercepts them and LAUNCHES out of his saddle -- CLOBBERING Maximian clean off his horse as they go crashing with their swords flying astray.

Both clamber up, caked with blood and dirt. Maximian looks murderous as he SLUGS Nicholas and Nicholas HURLS back with both hands CLASPED, two fists across one face -- SMASH!

Setting off a hardy exchange! Maximian CLAMPS his throat -- Nicholas manages to yank off his cross and SLASH his face!

Maximian bellows as Nicholas scurries, breathless, trying to find his sword. He grabs a SHIELD instead as Maximian snatches his sword and PUMMELS it! Tossing Nicholas aside.

Maximian strides forward like a bloodied madman and PUNISHES the shield. Hacking it into metal scrap as Nicholas is hurled into the fray of fighting soldiers.

Trampled, wading through on all fours... as Maximian cleaves a path to get to him. Nicholas spots HIS SWORD and can’t grab it in time as the greatsword arcs like a falling battle-axe!

But CLANG! The momentum is stopped by CONSTANTINE’S BLADES! Maximian FREES his sword as Constantine falls back -- Gripping one sword and one dirk. Studying Maximian’s moves...

As the towering brute steps in and SWINGS -- Constantine rolls and JAMS the dirk through his thigh. Maximian growls.

MAXIMIAN
You fight like a damn woman, Constantine!

Maximian DRAGS the dirk out of his own leg and tosses the bloody blade aside.

He ROARS and rains down blows as Constantine parries and twirls. Putting on a show of raw offense versus impenetrable defense. GLINTS showering. Steel on steel.

Maximian closes distance and CLOBBERS Constantine! He falls back as Maximian lifts his sword to finish him off but catches a glimpse of NICHOLAS' FACE in his mirrored blade.

He spins around and DEFLECTS Nicholas' massive SWING! The man is impossible to kill! But his sword goes FLYING!

Without a weapon, he DRILLS HIS SHOULDER into Nicholas and drives him back like a Roman linebacker... both ROARING... As Maximian BURIES Nicholas into the ground and Nicholas WILTS, GASPS like his lungs collapsed.

But Maximian SAGS with a last rush of breath as Nicholas looks down to see HIS SWORD protruding through Maximian's back. A sigh of relief, he fights for air, cloaked in blood.

Nicholas HEAVES Maximian off and registers the arterial red shrouding him, the bloodshed occurring all over... Struggling to endure the horrors of war and his contribution to it.

He connects eyes with Constantine in the distance...

SOLDIER (O.S.)
Maximian is dead!

They look over to a DETACHMENT falling back -- Escorting the EMPEROR back towards infantry lines.

Constantine gets a crazed look in his eye as he springs up and SLICES DOWN a mounted soldier. He throws his leg over and spurs the horse -- CHARGING AFTER Diocletian.

NICHOLAS
Constantine!!

Nicholas rises and finds Tiridates pummeling soldiers with his broadsword. He spots Nicholas --

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Constantine! He went by himself!

He acknowledges -- both snatch straggling horses. The duo mounts up and RIDES after Constantine.

CONSTANTINE rides with a focused fury towards the detachment escorting Diocletian. Fellow soldiers see him ROARING by --

CONSTANTINE
Sword!!

A sword is tossed, he SNATCHES it midair, twirls both blades as TWO detachment soldiers spin around and CHARGE HIM -- he screams -- closes in -- SLICE! SLICE! -- EXPLODES out from between them and looks back to them wilt and topple over.

HYAH! No relent! NICHOLAS and TIRIDATES catch up, riding hard. The detachment looks back, they're on their tail.

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)
Caesar!! Face me like a man!!

Then, Diocletian RAISES HIS HAND. The cavalry slows, spinning their horses to face Constantine, Nicholas, and Tiridates.

Diocletian dismounts. Constantine follows.

DIOCLETIAN
You're a traitor to your own kind, Constantine!

CONSTANTINE
I betrayed a coward's greed, nothing more!

DIOCLETIAN
Few will ever understand the burden I carried for Rome!

CONSTANTINE
Yet thousands bore your burden in cold blood!

DIOCLETIAN'S SOLDIER
Our numbers are greater, sire, we can crush them.

Tiridates HUFFS and trots forth.

TIRIDATES
I have drank from the skulls of men who used to have foolish brains like yours, boy!

His lunacy noted, they dismount and slowly form a segregated circle for Diocletian and Constantine to face off in.

The surrounding forces slowly stop their attack once they realize what is occurring. Some of Constantine’s centurions also arrive. A gradual hush falls over the fields.

Constantine knuckles two swords. Diocletian unsheathes his sword and snatches a shield. A decorated soldier himself.

They circle one another. Constantine’s eyes glisten with rage and vengeance rather than a sense of honor.

Nicholas notices.

Constantine takes the first stride forward, raising his blades and CLASH! Meeting shield and sword. The wager of battle begins.

Diocletian RAINS DOWN his sword -- steel rings on steel.

And SWINGS his heavy shield deftly to CRUSH Constantine’s face. But Constantine moves like liquid, WHIRLS aside and --

SNAPS BACK like a python, THRUSTING his sword forward, spinning around and SLASHING with his other sword --

As Diocletian barely parries the blows and catches a CUT across his arm. He staggers sideways and leans over -- first blood. All goes quiet. Every soldier watches apprehensively.

Constantine POUNCES but Diocletian was feigning the severity as he SWINGS his shield and SLAMS Constantine backwards. His SWORD skimming flesh as he hacks away and KNOCKS one of Constantine’s swords out.

Constantine uses his free hand to CATCH Diocletian’s wrist -- stopping the momentum of his sword as they both wince, struggle for dominance, face to face...

Constantine HEADBUTTS Diocletian, sending him stumbling back as he drives forward with an onslaught of blows. KNOCKING Diocletian’s sword out and sending him to his knees...

And without fanfare or hesitation he spins to deliver the FINAL BLOW as the emperor shuts his eyes just when --

CLANG! His sword is STOPPED! Constantine looks up wild-eyed and shocked to see -- NICHOLAS. Gripping his sword. Both men gazing at one another in a lost stupor.

Everyone around them shocked.

NICHOLAS
You’ve won, Constantine. The battle is yours...

CONSTANTINE
What are you doing, Nicholas??

NICHOLAS
You've won. Surrender your hate.
The change must begin with you.

Everyone watches, some incredulous, some inspired. Constantine fights back the ire that had clouded his eyes as he slowly... *Withdraws his sword.* The battle is over.

Soldiers close in to arrest Diocletian.

Constantine and Nicholas acknowledge one another, panting. Surveying the carnage around them. Coming to terms with what's happened and what must be done.

Nicholas looks down at the sword resting in his bloody palms. The blood smeared across the steel, leaving the engraved letters *etched out in red... KLAAS...*

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. STABLES - VALLEY OF THE RIVER TIBER, ROME - DAY

A RED STOLE folded and stuffed into a straw sack. Nicholas ties the mouth of the bag and sets it onto a large carriage -- tied to his white stallion, Preacher, and three other horses.

He helps Emmelia with her bags, stuffing the carriage full of bulging bags. Dusting his hands, he approves of his work and he looks over to his friends staring at him peculiarly --

CONSTANTINE
Are you certain you don't want to
borrow one of my fifty chariots?

NICHOLAS
I prefer traveling without
suspicion, your excellency.

Nicholas smiles, GRIPS Constantine's forearm. A silent beat, charged with gratitude.

Constantine is draped in a stately purple toga, wearing a laurel wreath. Beside him are Father Livius, Amado and the orphans. City Guards stand outside of the stables.

CONSTANTINE
Don't go growing all fat on me.
I'll need you back here in shape
and ready to work.

NICHOLAS
With Emmelia's cooking... I wouldn't be too concerned.

She shoots him a look -- *Is that so?*

EMMELIA
Don't believe it, he'll be larger than a musk-ox in no time, the way he eats.

Nicholas considers this... realizes she is probably right. He steps over to Father Livius, rests a hand on his shoulder and before he can speak --

FATHER LIVIUS
The children will be fine, Nicholas.

Nicholas swallows back his words, nods appreciatively and kneels down to the five orphans. Crestfallen, all of them.

ALBA
Why do you have to leave?

NICHOLAS
Well, you see... there are other children out there who still need our help. Not just in Rome but everywhere.
(looks at all of them)
Now all of you promise you'll be on your best behavior and help Father Livius with the orphanage, right?

The children all nod. Nicholas looks specifically at Clement, who tried to get away with the fib last time. But Clement struggles to nod, his eyes just well up with tears... As he steps in and HUGS Nicholas. Nicholas' eyes glaze over.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Alright... there, there... tell you what...

Nicholas rises and goes to his bags. He unstrings one and pulls out a WOODEN BOX. He goes back over to Clement and opens the box to reveal little wooden figurines inside.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Now, I'm leaving you in charge since you're the oldest, alright?

CLEMENT
What do we do with them?

NICHOLAS
Well... in a couple of months when Constantine's big church is finished, you will be celebrating the first holy mass there.

This already seems to stir some excitement in the children.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
And what I want you to do is distribute one of these to each of the other children who you think could use one, alright? Just like how I taught you.

Nods all around. Clement takes the box as they study the figurines. Nicholas musses his hair and rises to face Amado.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Something tells me we'll meet again. I don't know how to thank you, Amado...

Amado unclasps three rounded bronze BELLS from his eclectic belt and hands them over to Nicholas.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
What am I to do with these?

AMADO
From each one of my daughters. To remind you that it is I who is in gratitude, preacher.

Nothing else needs to be said. They HUG.

Nicholas turns and walks over to the carriage, climbing into the rider's box, stifling his emotions. Emmelia joins him.

He offers one last farewell nod and whips the reins as Preacher and the horses fall into motion, towing the carriage out of the stables...

The group watches them ride down the long road towards the distant Milvian Bridge, which crosses over the river Tiber.

With his back to the group, Nicholas raises the bells and gives them a light JINGLE.

The children smile as Nicholas peeks back and *winks*. He turns around and simply carries on...

MAN FROM SPAIN (V.O.)
And with that, Nicholas' legend was born. Spreading across the empire one village at a time and capturing the imaginations of children from all over. The man who sailed across the Mediterranean to The Golden Sea and brought back the kidnapped orphans...

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

The iron brazier from the opening scene casts its orange glow upon the huddled FAMILY, listening to the Man From Spain...

MAN FROM SPAIN
...Who climbed the rooftops and tossed a bag of gold down a stranger's chimney to save his daughters from slavery...

He turns to reveal none other than AMADO, sharing the story with his three daughters who have children of their own now.

EXT. VALLEY OF THE RIVER TIBER - MILVIAN BRIDGE - DUSK

The sun starts to dip as a crisp wind blows through. Emmelia covers herself with a cloak as they ride across the exquisite bridge revealing a view onto the big church Nicholas was referring to...

The massive rotunda of ST.PETER'S -- under construction with its large crucifix atop it as a beacon for a new Rome, silhouetted against the crimson sky.

AMADO (V.O.)
And the man who helped bring Rome's first Christian emperor to power. Constantine held up to his promise and began construction on the first Basilica of St.Peter... And throughout the course of time he was bestowed with the title, Constantine the Great. And yes... he did eventually move the capital only to have it named Constantinople.

INT. AMADO'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Amado surveys the beatific eyes of his grandchildren illuminated in the firelight.

GRANDCHILD
Where is Nicholas now, grandpapa?

Amado turns to the fire, smiles to himself.

AMADO
They were a long ways north the last I heard from them. Past Rome's dividing line, beyond the great river...

He pokes the fire, jarring *embers* to swim upwards that dissolve into... SNOW... somewhere in the north...

EXT. LARGE SNOWY TOWN -- DAY

SUPER: **NORTH OF THE DANUBE**

Nicholas' carriage rides into the edge of a snowy town framed with an almost antique Baltic facade, sitting at the base of a hill where a massive CASTLE lies.

Strewn with blemished stone buildings that seem to be given new life with its recent centerpiece -- a CHURCH. So beautiful it's almost mythical.

Nicholas and Emmelia are covered in thick furs. His beard is graying and the extra weight accentuates his cheekbones as he surveys the town and hears *children's laughter...*

His eyes follow the voices and he spots a group of children frolicking in the snow... all of it eerily similar to his dream.

They stop and look up at him for a moment, then the church bell TOLLS as they run off... not into any mysterious hut but rather into the church.

Nicholas' blue eyes glisten with a smile, knowing he may be home. As he whips the reins and takes Emmelia's hand, pushing ahead towards the unknown town in the north...

FADE OUT.