

GLADIATOR

by

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First Draft, Revised



RED WAGON PRODUCTIONS

EXT. NEAR THE GERMAN FRONT, 180 A.D. - DAWN

The rising sun unveils steep hills and luxuriant mountains untouched by man. Snow flurries dart in the frigid air and on the horizon CROWS gather.

EXT. DIRT ROAD

A column of Praetorian Cavalry flank two enclosed wagons as they rattle along a rock and log accordion road. On all sides a forest rises like some kind of primordial soul: limitless and dark. With every step 'steam' whooshes from the nostrils of the horses.

The first wagon halts as a Praetorian Guard jogs back. He straightens his tunic and helmet and raps on the wooden door as the second wagon stops behind. The door swings aside and another Praetorian Guard leans out.

1st PRAETORIAN GUARD

Sir, we must be getting near.

INT. FIRST WAGON

LUCIUS AELIUS AURELIUS COMMODUS huddles in the back of the wagon: Dark hair, handsome, beard; as Commodus rises we see he's a large, powerfully built young man and though barely twenty years old he already has the caution and arrogance of a Caesar.

Opposite A GAUNT MAN climbs from a heap of blankets: GALEN of PERGAMUM, probably the most frozen, unhappy man on earth. The wagon is lined with pillows and blankets. Baskets of bread and dried fruit are stacked in one corner and an oil lamp hangs from a pivoting cleat like the swinging lamp in a ship.

2nd PRAETORIAN GUARD

Caesar, we're nearly there.

EXT. WAGON

Commodus steps down and pulls his cape up against the bitter cold. Galen follows, curiosity overcoming his natural hatred of discomfort. TRIBUUS, burly Praetorian Guard commander salutes Commodus and leads him to the edge of a gully. Tribuus is an old-timer for whom Commodus is just another royal pain-in-the-ass.

THE GULLY IS BLACK WITH CROWS - with their endless "CAW-CAW-CAW" they feast on corpses and in the shadows below ROMAN SOLDIERS bury dead comrades. Compared with the burnished perfection of the Praetorian Guards these typical infantry grunts are grizzled and battered.

COMMODUS

Soldier! What happened here!

A legionnaire stops working, spits, leans on his shovel so he can shout up toward Tribuus and Commodus. Galen squats beside a corpse, fascinated.

LEGIONNAIRE

We had a battle!

COMMODUS

I can see that. You leave your dead on the field?

LEGIONNAIRE

General Narcissus beat the Germans here and now the whole army is moving fast! No time to let them get away!

THE SECOND WAGON --

as a twenty-five year old ATTRACTIVE YOUNG WOMAN opens the door. She is LUCILLA - Commodus' sister. Lucilla pulls her coat tight against the wind.

LUCILLA

Where are we now, Commodus? Can you see the camp? My Gods! The air is turning into ice!

COMMODUS

We're nearly there, Lucilla.

LUCILLA

That's what you told me two days ago!

COMMODUS

Will you please get back in your wagon? And stay there?

LUCILLA

I'm tired of being stuck in that wagon.

Embarrassed by Commodus' childish spat with his sister, Tribuus gestures to the 2nd Praetorian.

TRIBUUS

Soldier, help the Emperor's
sister.

As a the soldier jogs back up toward Lucilla
Commodus looks down at the legionnaire leaning on
his shovel.

COMMODUS

Where is my father?

TRIBUUS

Where is the emperor and the army,
soldier?

The legionnaire points up the road. Commodus and
Tribuus return to the wagon. Galen rolls the dead
soldier over and sticks his finger into a gaping
chest wound, then notices the legionnaire glaring at
him.

GALEN

I'm a doctor.

The legionnaire studies him a second, then the
corpse as if giving a second opinion.

LEGIONNAIRE

Well, you're too late.

Galen pulls back in revulsion at his impudence. He
scrambles to follow Commodus. The legionnaire spits
and gets back to work.

EXT. DIRT ROAD - DAWN

The wagon crests a hill with a precipitous view of
the valley and torches that seem to fill the
lingering dark far below. The wagon makes straight
for them.

AND COMMODUS...

Riding on a seat on the front of the wagon, wrapped
to his chin in a bearskin blanket - absolutely set
on catching up with the army.

EXT. GERMAN FRONT, VINDOBONA, 182 A.D. - NIGHT

On the edge of a forest sixty year old EMPEROR
MARCUS AURELIUS stands in the back of an unharnessed
supply wagon surrounded by a dark so black it's
barely moved by blazing torches.

A WOLF - living symbol of Rome - stands before the
wagon held on a leash by a battle-hardened SENIOR
CENTURION: SERVIS.

arcus wears the purple robe of imperial power over
 leather and copper segmented upper body armor
 (ORICA SEGMENTATA). His breath clouds in the
 bitter cold; the man is tired to the bone.

OPPOSITE STANDS THE ROMAN ARMY

is is the mighty army of the Danube, yet it seems
 like these men - buried in the shadows and as frozen
 and worn as their leader - have come to the very
 edge of the world to be swallowed by this
 wilderness.

MIDIAN ARCHERS, tall Africans, out of place in
 this freezing land, stand behind their leader - JUBA
 who has the whip-like body of a dancer. Each
 carries his recurve bow as if it were a delicate
 musical instrument. Quivers of brightly colored
 arrows hang from their backs.

Old commanders - CONTUBERNIUM - stand by each row
 of soldiers. Less numerous, and above the
 contubernium, are the CENTURIONS, and at the front
 line of the mass of cohorts are four TRIBUNES.

BEFORE THE ENTIRE ARMY

Mounted on magnificent grey horses, are two LEGATE,
 the overall commanding generals, wearing ornate
 orica segmentata. The first Legatus is QUINTUS
 LARUS, Rome Army General: fair-haired, fit, forty.
 He has the face of a boy.

The second is NARCISSUS MERIDAS, General, Spanish
 emina Felix VII Army: dark hair, proud and though
 about Quintus' age his face is like a map of a
 soldier's hard life. Narcissus' eyes are locked on
 Marcus like the eyes of a long-suffering pilgrim on
 the icon of his single hope.

THE WAGON

Just before Marcus is about to speak, Commodus steps
 into the wagon looking out of breath. Surprised,
 Marcus embraces him and then Commodus stands behind
 his father wrapped tightly in his bearskin robe.
 He's trying to look tough but unlike his father he's
 not used to this rigorous life.

MARCISSUS & QUINTUS

Quintus looks as if Commodus were the last person they
 were expecting...

MARCUS AURELIUS

Citizens!

Marcus' voice booms out tough and firm as if defying the cold and dark.

MARCUS AURELIUS

Today may be the last day in the life of Rome... For nine hundred years Rome has lived! For nine hundred years architects, mathematicians, poets, and philosophers have fled within her arms sheltered from superstition, prejudice, hate, and every form of human cruelty. We Romans have become a light in the barbarian night!

ON NARCISSUS

No trace of feeling, just his breath slowly clouding in the frigid air.

AND MARCUS...

Seeming to look at each legionnaire as he speaks.

MARCUS AURELIUS

For nine hundred years this one heart of humankind has been defended by the likes of Pompeii, Mark Anthony, Julius Caesar; The Divine Augustus; Claudius; Trajan; Hadrian; and my own father Antoninus Pius. Now, it has come down to us! It has come down to this one day...

He leans forward on the rail of the wagon, a gesture that seems to bring him closer to the men.

MARCUS AURELIUS

Five years we've lived together, you and I, in a state of total war. We have shared cold, rain, heat, bitterly watched the deaths of beloved friends. We are not alone. Look around you! Consuls and Senators have forsworn the luxuries of home and moved with us to the front to ensure that the administration of our government radiates from the source of her bravest citizens.

OUTSIDE A FIELD TENT

Stand SENATOR GAIUS and SENATOR FALCO wrapped to their chins against the staggering cold.

Both men are in advanced middle age. Gaius looks like a stoic: impassive, plainly dressed. Falco wears an expensive fur trimmed robe with gold and asbestos. Flanking them are CONSULS and various OFFICIALS. Lucilla stands by Gaius and a very stately, attractive NUMIDIAN WOMAN, MELA, Juba's wife.

MARCUS AURELIUS (O.S.)
The link between us and Rome is a solid chain of unbroken purpose!
For nine hundred years the Roman Senate has stood one with the army in dignity and resolve!

AND COMMODUS...

watching the troops, seeming to weigh any response with the utmost calculation.

AND MARCUS

eyes dead-ahead on the troops.

MARCUS AURELIUS
But on this day I ask you to put those nine centuries down - they're too heavy for us to carry into battle again! So, we'll leave them here for the Senators to guard for us!

QUINTUS

allows himself a smile as the troops grin and laugh. He looks across at Narcissus who manages the faintest of smiles - a very serious man...

MARCUS AURELIUS
This day I want you to fight for the cold and the heat and the filth - and for all those friends who will never feel the sun on their faces again! I want you to fight for you! For at the moment of battle you and you alone are Rome!

THE SOLDIERS...

Rank after disciplined rank: not one sideways look, not one sound...

AND MARCUS...

As his eyes pass from cohort to cohort.

MARCUS AURELIUS

How quickly all things sordid and perishable in the universe disappear. Yet throughout time the remembrance of great deeds grows only fresher bringing life again to those who dare perform them...

(pause)

Legate Narcissus Meridas and Legate Quintus Clarus, I must ask you and your legions for one more day out of nine centuries! Will you give it to me?

The troops HOWL their support. Marcus pulls his sword and half turns aiming it behind him.

MARCUS AURELIUS

There is the enemy of Rome!

Commodus steps forward to join his father and the uproar grows.

NARCISSUS

removes his helmet as a sign of respect. Now the stoic veneer of his face cracks into a mixture of reverence and perhaps even love for the emperor.

AND COMMODUS...

taking every single bit of this in. He seems particularly interested in Narcissus.

NARCISSUS & QUINTUS

Move their horses close and dismount.

QUINTUS

I see the emperor's little boy has finally caught up with the army.

NARCISSUS

Let's hope he doesn't start giving orders.

Servis approaches and salutes. It starts to RAIN. .

SERVIS

At your command, sir.

EXT. FOREST - EARLY MORNING

In a howling RAINSTORM Felix Division breaks through the dense woods like a moving human wall behind their rectangular shields.

They're in the midst of MASS COMBAT - spears, arrows and stones crash off shields, taking out soldiers.

The ZING of arrows and WHOOSH of spears saturate the air. Because there are no explosives EVERY SCREAM and ARROW SHOT is HEARD.

NARCISSUS

leads his troops on foot in the thick of battle. A CONTUBERNIUM walks beside Narcissus tugged on by the leashed WOLF MASCOT as painted GERMAN WARRIORS dart out of the woods hurling spears. NARCISSUS YELLS OVER THE SOUNDS OF BATTLE, WIND AND RAIN.

NARCISSUS

Tribune! The right flank is falling back! If we lose the flank we're all dead!

The Tribune salutes and dashes off and Servis rushes in from another direction.

SERVIS

Sir! There's a fortification ahead! The Germans are waiting for us! Should we slow the men down?

AHEAD

Juba leads his Numidians in a fluid, disorderly formation into the thickest part of the forest. Just before he dodges into the woods Juba locks eyes with Narcissus - and he's GONE.

NARCISSUS --

jerks his shield up in time to stop an ARROW. But a LEGIONNAIRE is SLAMMED IN THE CHEST by another as sniper-shots whiz in.

Now, from the distance comes the rolling roar of DRUMS and HOWLS. Then a horrendous THUNDERCLAP and a bolt of lightning tears the lead grey sky.

NARCISSUS

Come on, Servis! Forward!

Servis turns and runs down the front line as the storm becomes more intense. The YELLING and DRUMMING get LOUDER...

THE GERMAN FORTIFICATION

A chaos of interlocked logs rimmed at the top with sharpened stakes. GERMAN WARRIORS SHOUT WAIVING SPEARS AND CLUBS.

THE FELIX DIVISION

scatters the German snipers and rearguard before it, closing on the fortification.

TRIBUNE

Where the hell are the damned archers?

NARCISSUS

Don't worry about Juba; just keep our own damned troops moving!

German warriors loose an avalanche of rocks and spears.

NARCISSUS

Tortoise!

TRIBUNE

Tortoise! Form a tortoise!

As the call echoes legionnaires furiously overlap their shields on all sides and overhead forming a perfect BOX just as the stones and spears crash against them...

INSIDE THE TORTOISE

rocks slam the wall of interlocked shields with ear-splitting resonance. But the tortoise holds.

OUTSIDE

soon as the barrage stops the Germans unleash FIGHTING MASTIFFS. The dogs tear into the legionnaires. One leaps at Narcissus and he kills it with a single chop of his Spatha sword.

SERVIS

Here they come!

German Warriors charge the shields as the legionnaires level their spears. Singing and screaming the warriors IMPALE THEMSELVES ON THE SPEARS and grasp the shafts. A SECOND WAVE charges the line on the heels of the first.

THE LEGIONNAIRES --

In a well rehearsed movement twist their spears releasing the tips. As the dying warriors drop with the quick-release spear tips imbedded in their bodies, the Romans reverse their spears over the top and - no problem: Roman spears have points on BOTH ENDS. So the German second wave is met by an intact position.

Still they power into the line chopping at the Roman shields with axes.

FAR BEHIND...

a legionnaire blows a piercing note on a brass horn and a second, thin line of legionnaires APPEARS OUT OF THE FOREST. Narcissus turns, yelling to a contubernium behind him.

NARCISSUS

Answer that signal!

A red 'flag' on a long pole goes up answering the trumpet, and the line of the fresh cohort parts in segments revealing ONAGERS - portable catapults - and SCORPIONS - powerful precision-fire crossbows that launch javelins.

THE ARTILLERY FIRES...

cannonball-size shot driven at a hundred miles an hour rip over the heads of Narcissus' troopers and slam against the fort walls.

ONAGER CREWS

reload with incredible speed from wagons filled with hand-picked rocks - some bear SCRAWLED EPITHETS essentially the Latin equivalent of "EAT THIS HANS!" Onagers launch barrage after barrage their backs leaping off the ground like recoiling 45 millimeter field guns.

SCORPION OPERATORS

pick their targets. The Germans are leveled by a sheet of scorpion javelins as their crude log fortification splinters under the onager barrage. The Germans are being pulverized by superior technology.

THE WHOLE GERMAN ARMY --

led by tall GRUB BEARDED MAN, pours from the log blockade and hurls itself against the Roman line.

Again the Romans are staggered as the Germans collapse more of their shields, battering through the front line with clubs and axes.

NARCISSUS --

fights desperately refusing to give ground. A German rears up from behind and slams Narcissus in the back with a club and HE GOES DOWN.

Narcissus is nearly trampled as another GERMAN WARRIOR throws himself on Narcissus holding his sword arm about to kill him with a club - there's a blur of fur and blood as the ROMAN WOLF LEAPS INTO THE WARRIOR'S FACE.

Narcissus lurches back to his feet and seeing he's in the midst of the whole German army he goes wild. Yelling and slashing out with his sword and the knife-edge top of his shield, in seconds he's drenched with blood.

LIKE SOME FANTASTIC ROMANTIC PAINTING -

Narcissus climbs onto a HEAP OF BODIES flashing his sword with the snarling Wolf of Rome at his side.

CENTURIONS AND LEGIONNAIRES --

see this supernatural vision of their leader battling for life -

SERVIS

Romulus! The gods of Rome are fighting with general Narcissus!

Others join the cry as more legionnaires turn and there's an irresistible surge of the army back toward Narcissus.

NARCISSUS

joined by Servis, then another, then two Contubernium, then ten legionnaires... the legionnaires fight desperately to hold their ground around Narcissus.

Then with a sound of a hundred out-of-tune violins the Germans are SWEPT FROM BEHIND BY ARROWS.

JUBA'S NUMIDIANS

line the edge of the forest four deep pouring arrows into the Germans. Juba stands on a log in front shouting PIERCING SING-SONG ORDERS easily heard over screams of battle.

NARCISSUS & HIS TROOPS

DIVE behind their shields for cover from the cloudburst of arrows.

Arrows fired by almighty recurve bows hit the Germans with the power of .44 magnum rounds: arms splinter like twigs; shields are nailed to chests; skulls explode.

The Germans turn and charge the Numidians but they may as well hurl themselves against a machine gun nest as they're mowed-down in whole lines. They hurtle back in disorder into the forest.

THE ROMANS

lower their shields. Narcissus catches a fast smile from Juba, then jumps to his feet...

NARCISSUS

Come on men! Forward!

RIVER BANK

The retreating German army spills out of the forest following their leader into a shallow narrows, Narcissus and his divisions on their heels.

ABOVE

on the opposite bank is a single Roman on horse back. It's Quintus. He draws his sword and spurs ahead - then right behind him rush his fresh ROME COHORTS.

THE TWO ROMAN ARMIES --

crash into the Germans in the middle of the river - throwing aside his shield and holding his sword with two hands Narcissus chops his way into the enemy with a fury.

Wild chaos of horrendous fighting in knee-deep water - spray, blood, flashing swords and flying spears as men desperately kill to stay alive.

Then the two Roman armies close like a fist and the surviving Germans squeeze through the fingers in disarray.

NARCISSUS & QUINTUS

meet in the middle of the river and at that moment the legionnaires realize they've won. They howl and stab at the heavens with their swords to intimidate the gods.

Narcissus pulls off his lorica segmentata which literally drools blood and heaves it into the water. Then in the vortex of the cheering cohorts, he and Quintus embrace.

FROM ABOVE

The Danube runs RED...

EXT. ROMAN CAMP, VINDOBONA - NEAR DUSK

Surrounded by cheering legions Narcissus rides his grey horse slowly into camp. Servis walks ahead leading the beloved wolf mascot on a leash. Quintus rides beside Narcissus, but it's clear all this adulation is for Narcissus.

Narcissus dismounts and finally the crowd parts revealing Commodus outside the Roman headquarters flanked by slaves and Praetorian Guard. Commodus strides forward and embraces him as a cheer goes up from the soldiers.

COMMODUS

Welcome back from your great triumph Narcissus Meridas. My father sends his heart felt praise. Sadly, Marcus is in dark humors - nothing to worry about, but he needs rest. Likely just the weather.

NARCISSUS

Respectfully Caesar, Quintus and I must report.

COMMODUS

Of course, but not now. However, if he continues to be unwell, you may report to me.

A challenging look from Commodus - clearly Narcissus is not in the mood to report to this boy. Quintus steps in.

QUINTUS

Gladly, Caesar. And, if you'd like we can take you for a tour of the front at first light.

COMMODUS

I'm certain father will be in better humors by then. Now, honor us with your presence at dinner. I'll join you as soon as I see my father's physician.

For a second Commodus eyes the shouting army... it makes him NERVOUS. Then he turns to enter the building.

NARCISSUS

What the hell was all that about?

QUINTUS

What the hell do you think it was about? There's nothing an unproved heir to the throne likes less than glaring competence in others.

NARCISSUS

Why don't we try to keep politics out of the conversation.

QUINTUS

Well, we can try...

INT. ROMAN HQ, - EARLY EVENING

Inside the single large building at the Vindobona central base, a wraith-like FORTUNE TELLER stands with her eyes closed, hand on Falco's head.

TRIBUNES and high ranking HANGERS-ON bask near a blazing hearth like over-fed dogs. Senator Gaius sits apart near Juba and his wife Mela. All are fixated on Falco.

FORTUNE TELLER

...a great man: great of birth -
great of girth!

(laughs all around)

Your fate in flame and bronze is wrought... the rest in haze is sought.

FALCO

Smoke from the fire no doubt!

She opens her eyes and Falco hands her a coin.

NARCISSUS

Fire and bronze - symbols of strong character, Senator!

All turn toward Narcissus and Quintus.

FALCO

General Narcissus, it's your turn! Everyone in this room would love to know your future. So on, ask him if he'll stand for the Senate!

Applause as Narcissus catches a smirk from Quintus.

NARCISSUS

No future-telling, please, I've been terrified enough for one day.

LUCILLA

Narcissus! Terrified? You? The only thing he's scared of is me.

Lucilla greets Narcissus with an embarrassingly intimate embrace. Looks like she's been hitting the sauce pretty good.

GAIUS

Slave! Wine and meat for our generals! The saviors of Rome!

FALCO

Judging from your adoring troops and what we heard, Narcissus, you are personally responsible for our victory.

Lucilla hangs onto Narcissus' hand taking him around the room like he was her date.

LUCILLA

You know our two most senior Senators: Gaius Cantus and Falco Verus?

NARCISSUS

Only from a distance.

GAIUS

Well let's not be so distant, general. Now that this war is ending Rome needs good men off the battlefield as well.

JUBA

The Wolf of Rome fought beside him. I saw it with my own eyes.

Narcissus looks at Juba as if to say 'thanks a lot.'

LUCILLA

You see? The Gods favor you for greatness! Tell us about it - all about it.

VOICES

Yes/Tell us/Tell all!

NARCISSUS

The truth is I got into a little trouble and when the army came to rescue me the German counterattack broke around us. An example of being in precisely the wrong place at exactly the right time.

(off their laughs)

It was Juba and his archers who finally got them running. Then Quintus arrived with the Rome legions just in time to cut off their retreat.

Commodus and Galen suddenly step into the light; it's unclear how long Commodus may have been listening in the doorway. Everyone rises...

COMMODUS

Narcissus Meridas, you win the battle and deny you had any hand in it. But if we had lost, you would have taken complete responsibility. Senators, Rome needs more such models of humility and courage.

(pause)

My father sends regrets that he will not join us after all as he continues to be unwell.

Commodus reaches over to fill Lucilla's cup which is nearly brimming.

COMMODUS

More wine, sister? Surely you can drink more than that.

LUCILLA

I was suddenly thinking about going to bed.

COMMODUS

Oh, stay...

(that was an order)

Don't you want to join the chorus of praises for Narcissus' glory? Just remember, he is a married man.

NARCISSUS

Do you expect Marcus to be well enough by morning for an audience?

COMMODUS

That's difficult to say, general.

NARCISSUS

Perhaps, Master Galen, you may say.

GALEN

It's difficult to name a time...

COMMODUS

May I remind everyone that Master Galen is the finest medical philosopher in the Empire and his detailed assessment of the Emperor is delicate and confidential and is the business of the immediate family alone.

NARCISSUS

I would venture, with all respect: the Emperor's health is the business of every soul in the empire.

GAIUS

Yes! The days of Imperial Prerogative and disdain for the Senate are over - thanks to your father! Now report to the Senate, Master Galen: what is Marcus' state?

COMMODUS

Report, Master Galen, by all means. The Senate demands it...

GALEN

We are talking simply about a disturbance of the hues. Nothing more. In precisely one hour I will analyze the Emperor's bile and then my assistants and I will stand by in an unflinching vigil until his fever breaks. Now with your permission Caesar, Senators? I must return to my patient.

Commodus gestures him out as if he were just amused.

COMMODUS

One doctor now knows his place in the empire. Congratulations, general, your victory seems to inspire courage everywhere.

Quintus stops flirting with Lucilla's slaves and starts paying close attention to the developing dynamics.

NARCISSUS

The battle was won, today, and I prefer to believe it was a gift of Janus, the eldest God of Rome. God of my ancestors.

FALCO

God of passages and changes?

NARCISSUS

I believe we are arriving in an enlightened age; an age of peace that will bring Rome her greatest glory. Thanks to Marcus Aurelius.

FALCO

You know, general, there is a Gate of Janus in Rome which is only closed in time of peace. Sadly, it has remained open for three hundred years.

NARCISSUS

I've read of it.

FALCO

But have never been?

NARCISSUS

My only visits to Rome, Senator, have been through books. But the war's over, time to close the door of war once and for all.

COMMODUS

Then you'd be out of a job.

NARCISSUS

Gladly Caesar.

COMMODUS

Or perhaps into a new one. But here's to your God and the courage of our legions...

GAIUS

And the man who gives them this extraordinary courage.

Gaius stands and raises his cup. But Quintus is amused to see him get as close to Narcissus as he can - nearly hiding behind him.

COMMODUS

Quite so. Narcissus and his courageous men; may they live long to serve Rome...

LUCILLA

And Caesar! Let's not forget to
serve Caesar!

Falco in turn moves to stand near Commodus.

FALCO

They are one and the same my lady.
Which is why we senior Senators
have chosen to be here on the
front to share the hardships of
our courageous Emperor - Marcus
Aurelius and his son - may the
gods protect them!

LUCILLA

Oh, yes, my father is a raving
genius - poet, essayist,
philosopher, warrior... It's a
wonder he doesn't drift off like a
cloud he's so damned ethereal.
'Marcus Aurelius Etherealus'...
But he should cast his divine eyes
earthward once in a while and see
how fallible some of his decision
have been! Of course I don't mean
you, Commodus - gods know you're
perfect. As far as sharing in his
glory and suffering - well, I
certainly didn't want to be here.
Isn't that true, darling brother?
Commodus, I believe, was afraid
that if I stayed in Rome I might
foment a rebellion! Seize power
for myself!

Commodus glares at Lucilla as she trails off in
laughter. Mela decides it's time to rescue Lucilla
from herself. She rises and crosses to sit beside
her.

MELA

If you men are going to talk
politics leave us out of it.

JUBA

She's not so bashful about
politics when we're alone.

MELA

Only when it concerns Numidia.
And, we're far from home so I'll
play the good Roman woman and
listen - perhaps Lucilla we could
play that part together.

COMMODUS

What do you say, Narcissus? Where are you in this great new balance between the Emperor or the Senate?

GAIUS

Are you for the Senate, Narcissus Meridas? Or do you back the emperor?

NARCISSUS

I back Rome against all her enemies - if that answer disappoints you, I'm not a politician...

COMMODUS

Oh, but with the army behind you, you could become extremely political. Not a Republican by any chance?

FALCO

Be as brave here as you are on the battlefield...

QUINTUS

In the presence of such fearless senators there's little need for loyal soldiers to speculate on politics.

COMMODUS

Ah, Quintus famous for his perfect timing. But we want to know what the hero of the Danube thinks.

Dead silence. Every face in the room turns to Narcissus.

NARCISSUS

A republican is a man who strives to create equality among all classes. At the core he's a man who believes in doing what's right.

GAIUS

The trouble is defining exactly what 'right' is.

NARCISSUS

We all know what right is, Senator.

COMMODUS

I would say there's nothing more dangerous than a man who knows what 'right' is.

NARCISSUS

The dangerous man, Caesar, is the man who doesn't care.

Stony silence. A SLAVE enters.

SLAVE

The emperor is awake. He asks to see his generals.

MARCUS AURELIUS' ROOM - LATER

Marcus Aurelius sits up in his bed and watches with a seasoned campaigner's eye as Narcissus and Quintus lean over a large, beautifully hand-drawn map. Commodus sits by his side the attentive son.

NARCISSUS

Felix Army controls the narrows. Four cohorts from Quintus' legion hold the opposite shore and once we repair the German fort we'll be able to reinforce and supply them at will.

Seeing he's having trouble seeing, Narcissus holds the map up for him.

MARCUS AURELIUS

Can the Germans cross up stream on boats or float bridges?

QUINTUS

Not through those rapids. They're disorganized and their army barely exists.

NARCISSUS

But they're not destroyed, not yet.

COMMODUS

Do we really need to repair this fort? It seems like an expensive undertaking. I propose we burn it to the ground. That way if the Germans cross the Danube here there will be nothing to help them build an offensive position.

MARCUS AURELIUS

Commodus, it's we who are going on the offensive.

NARCISSUS

The fort helps position us for a final invasion in the spring when they're most vulnerable.

MARCUS AURELIUS

Commodus - listen to Narcissus, listen to the man who has never lost a battle for Rome! You're young with years ahead of you before you gain the experience to wear the purple!

Commodus visibly reacts, but swallows his anger. Marcus sits back, weakened from the exchange.

COMMODUS

Father, you have to rest...

MARCUS AURELIUS

I'm sorry... all of you, excuse me.

They all make shallow bows and turn to leave, but Marcus holds Narcissus' hand. Quintus sees and politely leaves, but Commodus only goes reluctantly.

MARCUS AURELIUS

I want you to start your work for the last phase of the campaign.

NARCISSUS

I will, Marcus. But you're going to be well enough to direct it yourself.

MARCUS AURELIUS

I've made so many mistakes, Narcissus. We all put off the very last duties of our lives because we're afraid of admitting when our lives are over.

NARCISSUS

There's no reason to say that. Everyone knows you're going to be well. I had Servis groom your horse for a triumphal visit to the front at first light.

MARCUS AURELIUS

Servis made it through again?

NARCISSUS

He's like you, sir, too tough for the Gods to swallow.

Marcus laughs and looks like he's better just talking with Narcissus. But now he holds Narcissus' hand with both of his.

MARCUS AURELIUS

If I'd ever had a sign that you wanted to rule I would have... no, again, it's my own bullheadedness. Narcissus, I should have adopted you years ago. And now the Gods are begging me to make you my son!

NARCISSUS

Commodus is just a young man, he'll learn what you had to learn.

MARCUS AURELIUS

It's not because he's young, it's because he's ignorant and arrogant. His sister is a better man. That's why I have undertaken to begin sweeping changes in the relationship between the emperor and the Senate.

NARCISSUS

So I understand.

MARCUS AURELIUS

Everyone talking about it? I wouldn't wonder. All I seek is a genuine balance of power between the Emperor and the Senate. Thus I have transferred legal power - which was theirs to begin with - back to the Senators. This includes a shared right to taxation to but some bite in the plan. It's a start, only a start. If the Emperor and the Senate can share power then the people will be ready to take their share. This means Commodus has to bend; does he strike you as that type?

NARCISSUS

You're too hard on him. He is a strong young man, with you as his guide...

MARCUS AURELIUS

A man should be upright, not be kept upright.

(pause)

History shows us that a good general is quick to recognize opportunities - even if it means making a complete about face at the last minute. I want you to consider becoming my heir.

NARCISSUS

Marcus, you honor me, but I'm a soldier, politics scare the hell out of me.

MARCUS AURELIUS

The Senators admire you.

NARCISSUS

They fear me.

MARCUS AURELIUS

They fear change. The new Caesar must be honest enough to know when the emperorship is no longer feasible. You could be the one, the Emperor, the man who oversees the rebirth of the Republic.

NARCISSUS

I'll do anything in my power to help you restore the Republic but I can't be that power.

The door creeps open and Galen slips in followed by Commodus.

GALEN

General; the emperor needs my full attention. Please? He must have his elixirs.

MARCUS AURELIUS

Don't waste time. Finish our work... Swear!

NARCISSUS

I swear, Marcus.

Marcus smiles, but grips his hand.

MARCUS AURELIUS

I'm going to miss riding the lines with you, Narcissus...

HALLWAY

Commodus walks Narcissus to the door himself.

COMMODUS

You and my father have become very close. Perhaps one day I may say the same for us.

NARCISSUS

You flatter me, Caesar.

COMMODUS

Being as close, I'm certain you've noticed what we all have noticed.

NARCISSUS

Caesar?

COMMODUS

That this illness has clouded his mind.

He shuts the door with an ominous finality.

EXT. MARCUS AURELIUS' QUARTERS - NIGHT

Narcissus turns and runs straight into Lucilla who's been waiting for him. Her reaction is to put her arms around his neck and look up into his smiling face. But he's just amused.

LUCILLA

I though all good generals were quick to recognize opportunities.

NARCISSUS

Sneaking around with your brother?

LUCILLA

Without him. He'd be weeping if he overheard that. Well? The idea of you as my adopted brother is very... exciting.

NARCISSUS

I'm not fit for the job and as a matter of fact I'm not taking the job.

LUCILLA

Why do you keep playing at being so humble? It's a little embarrassing.

NARCISSUS

Why do you play at being drunk?

LUCILLA

How do you know I am playing?
Well, the clown is always
harmless. Isn't that right? And
how did you ever get to know me so
well? The last we spent any time
together I was fourteen. I think
you know me better than my father.

(pause)

He's going to die, isn't he?

NARCISSUS

I don't believe that. He's got
the best doctor in the world and a
will of iron. You know we're
preparing for a full-blown
invasion of Germany.

LUCILLA

Of course I know - who do you
think is paying for it? The
Emperor himself, didn't you know?
Why do you think Commodus came
rushing up to the front? Burning
patriotism? Filial love? He
wants to be sure when he takes
over there's enough cash left in
the treasury to... play Emperor.
Watch out for him, Narcissus; he's
inexperienced, but... be careful.

INT. NARCISSUS' TENT - NIGHT

Narcissus painfully pulls his toga over his head and
for the first time we really get to see his battle
wounds. All the dressings have bled through. He
dips fresh bandages in a bowl of hot water... the
reaches back and peels off a dressing.

FIVE LITTLE FIRED TABLET PORTRAITS OF NARCISSUS'
ANCESTORS... each in an individual stand on a tiny
alter. Narcissus' table is set with five colorful
wooden plates with food and drink for each. Dressed
again, he not so much as prays to the tablets as
carries on a conversation.

NARCISSUS

Postumas, Lilliana, Gyan,
Agrippina, Lartes. The battle is
won, my family. Of course, I'm
sure you were there with me,
Gyan. Grandmother always said
you loved a good fight.

(MORE)

NARCISSUS (CONT'D)

Lilliana, I set some local fruit at your place tonight. They're not bad. And don't tell me you don't like exotic food.

He lights incense that goes up fast seeming to flood the tent with smoke.

NARCISSUS

Welcome to the table of life, my ancestors.

Narcissus hoists his arm onto a folding stool and leans his head on his arm, exhaustion finally taking over. In the dark and the smoke of the incense he falls asleep.

THE ANCESTORS...

There's a moment when their faces seem somehow alive in the ghostly, shimmering smoke.

VOICE

Daddy... Daddy! Daddy wake up!

NARCISSUS

slowly focuses on the portraits in the muted dawn light. In front of the portraits is the beaming face of a YOUNG GIRL. She's his Six year old daughter THEMIS, a black-haired, dark eyed beauty.

NARCISSUS

Themis!

She holds a DOLL up in his face: it's a doll dressed up like a Roman General.

THEMIS

This is you, daddy.

He picks her up and spins around to find his wife SELENE with their older daughter MANTO. Now the others rush to embrace him. A thirty-year old male house-hold slave - LINDO - enters carrying woven bags of personal belongings.

NARCISSUS

Selene! Manto! Lindo, too! Oh, gods... how did you get here?

EXT. CAMP, NEAR THE DANUBE - MORNING

As the family walks along the edge of a slow moving, peaceful bend of the great river, Themis holds her doll for Narcissus' approval.

Lindo walks close; though a slave he's clearly part of the family.

Narcissus takes the toy likeness, makes sure his daughter sees he's giving it a serious scrutiny.

NARCISSUS

He's very realistic.

SELENE

Isn't the helmet magnificent?

THEMIS

I made the plume from a quail feather.

NARCISSUS

Much more colorful than the ones we wear. And, of course, less dented.

MANTO

Father, is it true the Germans are just fighting to protect their land?

Narcissus and Selene swap a fast look.

SELENE

Well, you wanted the girls to have the best teachers.

NARCISSUS

Greeks?

SELENE

Athenians...

That sounds even worse.

MANTO

Teacher says that the divine Julius used the Germans as a pretext to dissolve the Republic.

NARCISSUS

Did he now..?

MANTO

And that the Germans are only struggling to keep their honor and the ways of their people. And that throughout history Rome has always been the aggressor.

NARCISSUS

Well, remind teacher: once upon a time it was the Hebrews over the Philistines; the Babylonians over the Hebrews; Egypt over Babylon; the Greeks over the Trojans; Persians over the Greeks; Etruscans over the Latins; Sabines over the Latins and Etruscans. Now it's Rome over everyone and I don't know when the world has known such peace.

MANTO

I can't wait to tell my teachers all that!

Can see Narcissus feels better about this already.

NARCISSUS

What about their philosophy lessons?

SELENE

They're studying with Cynics

NARCISSUS

Of course...

THEMIS

Daddy, Lindo says these forest are haunted by sprites and spirits! Can we go to be early so we can meet them in our dreams?

Narcissus and Selene catch Lindo's smile...

INT. TENT - LATE NIGHT

Narcissus and Selene making love in the dark. From outside come distant lightning flashes followed by the hollow roll of far off thunder.

Finally Selene collapses against Narcissus, but it looks like she could go on for another hour if she just weren't simply exhausted. They laugh quietly at their passion.

SELENE

You need to come home!

NARCISSUS

I can see that...

SELENE

The battle is over. The war is over. You've won!

NARCISSUS

If you win, you know, you have to stay. It's the losers who get to go home. Besides, I'm not so sure it is over. Centurions report enemy scouts probing our lines.

Selene sighs, then gets an idea and slides out of bed; she returns with a long necked jug.

SELENE

Look what we've brought you all the way from Spain.

He looks at the jug and the label.

NARCISSUS

This is our oil from our estates?

SELENE

I've been overseeing production myself for the past three years, you'll be surprised at how wonderful our oil has become.

She pushed the bottle neck between her naked breasts and smiles.

SELENE

If you want to know, you'll have to come and get it.

Narcissus puts his hand on the base of the bottle, then lets his hand slide to her breast. But she moves the bottle aside, pulls him close - but he snatches the bottle and gives it a good look.

NARCISSUS

Very fancy. Did you design the bottle?

SELENE

Who else? I'm the one who runs the estates while you're here risking everything we have for the glory of Rome! Or for the glory of you!

NARCISSUS

I'm a soldier - we're at war. I can't stay home tending the damned olive groves?

SELENE

We don't need your help we're doing great on our own.

Narcissus cools down, sees this is going a bad way.

NARCISSUS

I want to come home, of course I do, I'd have to be mad not to want that. It's just that Marcus trusts me.

SELENE

Let him trust Quintus.

NARCISSUS

Quintus is overly idealistic.

SELENE

I never knew a more idealistic man than you.

NARCISSUS

Me? Well, I believe in Rome... you'd have to after what I've seen, how people outside the empire treat each other.

SELENE

I don't even want to imagine the things you've seen...

NARCISSUS

What you don't want to imagine is the things I've done.

Silence. All the while they've been talking the storm has been slowly approaching, thunder beating ominously closer. Selene embraces him.

Suddenly Manto and Themis leap into bed with them and push beneath their bearskin blanket. Themis is crying and Manto is shaken.

SELENE

Girls! What's the trouble?
Manto?

MANTO

Lindo was right! This is a haunted place! The night spirits came to us...

THEMIS

We had horrible nightmares!

Lighting flashes and thunder drops like a bomb as the storm settles on the camp. The girls pull themselves close to Selene and Narcissus.

INT. NARCISSUS' TENT - LATE AFTERNOON

Themis and Manto help Selene and Lindo pack the last of several baskets.

NARCISSUS

Don't stop to visit - take the children straight home and I'll follow as soon as I can.

THEMIS

Tomorrow?

NARCISSUS

As soon as I can.

THEMIS

On your honor as a Roman officer, daddy?

NARCISSUS

On my honor as your daddy...

One of Narcissus personal guards enters.

PERSONAL GUARD

Sir, Caesar Commodus and Quintus Clarus to see you.

NARCISSUS

Tell them to come in!

Commodus and Quintus enter as the guard returns to his post. Quintus sets his helmet down. He's wearing his lorica segmentata.

QUINTUS

Selene, girls.

Commodus nods as Selene motions for the children to sit quietly.

QUINTUS

Marcus Aurelius has died.

COMMODUS

He left us at dawn.

Everyone stunned. Selene embraces the children. Narcissus slowly sits back at the table.

COMMODUS

Please accept my deepest sympathy as you were one of his most loyal officers.

Narcissus takes out four scrolls, hands them to Commodus.

NARCISSUS

These were my latest reports to Marcus.

But Quintus takes them.

COMMODUS

I want to extend my hand in gratitude for what you have done for my father and Rome, and to offer my friendship. The next few weeks will be trying. As you know Marcus wisely or unwisely laid the foundations for greater Senatorial control and there are those likely to take advantage of his good intentions. Will you join me in strengthening my government? As you know your support, your friendship at this critical moment would silence a dangerous faction.

While they speak Quintus unrolls the documents. He's not happy reading them.

QUINTUS

Serious stuff...

NARCISSUS

Centurions on both sides of the river are convinced the Germans will try one last offensive. They've got nothing to lose and it's so very like them.

Commodus and Quintus swap a fast look.

COMMODUS

I'm ordering a general stand-down in preparation for withdrawal back across the Danube.

NARCISSUS

We have to stop the Germans now!

QUINTUS

We must obey our emperor and the Senate.

COMMODUS

I met with Falco and the Senators have agreed to call for a truce with the Germans.

NARCISSUS

Forgive me, Caesar, but do two Senators represent the mood of the whole Senate or the will of the Roman people? Besides, every truce we make with the Germans they break!

COMMODUS

They won't break this one.

NARCISSUS

Apparently my opinion wasn't needed.

QUINTUS

Everyone knew you would have been outspoken against this deal.

NARCISSUS

What deal?

QUINTUS

Rome is going to pay an allotment to the German tribes on an annual basis.

Narcissus reacts as if he'd been stabbed.

NARCISSUS

Rome is going to pay tribute - like a defeated nation begging for mercy? Have you told your troops that?

QUINTUS

My troops don't make policy.

NARCISSUS

Well, they die for it!

SELENE

Narcissus - it's over! Pack and come home with us...

COMMODUS

You have a wise woman by your side.

NARCISSUS

On his death bed I promised Marcus I would complete our work here. The Senate may be vacillating, but I have the army behind me. I'm taking half a cohort and restocking that fort.

QUINTUS

I can't let you do that.

Narcissus turns and for the first time really looks Quintus over.

NARCISSUS

In your armor, Quintus? Is that how you come to visit a friend?

They stare at each other. Narcissus goes for his sword just as LEGIONNAIRES rush in. Commodus backs against the tent wall. Narcissus heaves one soldier into the furniture, fells another with a chair and grabs his sword...

QUINTUS

Don't kill him!

Three soldiers tackle Narcissus to the floor. Soldiers grab Selene and the children - Lindo reaches for a knife and he's immediately killed. The children SCREAM...

SELENE

Narcissus..!

INT. CELL - NIGHT

Narcissus sits in the dirt leaning against the log wall, his hands chained in front of him. The door opens and four heavily armed Praetorian Guard enter.

EXT. CELL - NIGHT

Narcissus stands in the pouring rain facing Falco, Gaius, Tribuus and several tribunes. Four slaves hold a canvas over Commodus and the others - as they talk Narcissus continues to be drenched.

NARCISSUS

Where is my family?

COMMODUS

Cooperate and they will be returned to your estate. I could have executed you.

NARCISSUS

And my army would have thrown your body into the Danube.

They glare at each other in the dark; Commodus' eyes seem to burn in the lamp light.

COMMODUS

The army is a problem. They love you. You have led them from victory to victory in the name of Rome and they love you. And after all, you're just a hothead acting from a misguided sense of loyalty - who could fault you for that?

(w/a nod to Falco)

Thus have I reached a compromise with the Senate over your fate: Instead of executing you, I'm sending you to Rome where you will be tried...

NARCISSUS

On what charge?

FALCO

Insubordination. To the Emperor... and the Senate.

COMMODUS

Quintus will tell the army that you are being called to Rome to celebrate your victory. They will hear that you are living in luxury. He will let them feel you have betrayed them for the good life. And soon the army won't even remember your name.

All turn and leave but Gaius. Two soldiers hold Narcissus while a third goes through the process of chaining his wrists.

NARCISSUS

The Senate too?

GAIUS

The moment you returned from the battle your options were clear. If you are a friend to neither side, legate, you must be an enemy to both. We needed to know what you believed.

NARCISSUS

I hope you live to see what I believe...

At that the soldiers drag Narcissus toward a wagon with tiny barred windows.

INT. PRISON WAGON - NIGHT

In the dark Narcissus is chained to a bench and the door slams shut.

EXT. PRISON WAGON WHEEL - DAY

The thick spcke wood wheel slams over rocks and ruts of a primitive forest road.

INT. WAGON - DAY

Narcissus jars awake and flies swarm off his face. A GERMAN PRISONER is chained to the wall, a rag-wrapped chain around his mouth as a gag. His head nods forward; could be asleep, could be dead. Narcissus leans forward and is stopped by his own chains. He glares at the rusted iron links as if they were the most unbearable insult.

JUBA

Narcissus!

At the far end of the wagon is Juba. Looks like he's been worked over pretty good. They stare at each other.

JUBA

You on your way to trial, too, general? Or do you think they've already had our trial?

NARCISSUS

Why you?

JUBA

My loyalties... were in doubt.

NARCISSUS

Fools to let us both live; we'll be our own best witnesses at our trial.

JUBA

That's what worries me...

Suddenly hands LURCH FOR HIS THROAT but are stopped by chains. It's the gagged German. He drops his arms, but keeps his eyes lowered staring at the Imperial Roman Eagle around Narcissus' neck.

FADE TO:

ME - DAY

a flowing toga and golden laurel, Commodus
 into Rome in a military chariot through the
 Titus that leads down the 'Sacred Road'
 the Forum. A skeleton force of legionnaires
 just behind as DRUMMERS beat a brisk tattoo.
 walks ahead of the chariot as two
 aires hold military standards on high.

hey pass the Senate on their left where the
 s stand on the steps to greet him. Falco is
 nt and raises his arms in welcome. As they
 e Senate they're surrounded by citizens.

TRIBUUS

Marcus Aurelius Commodus Antoninus
 Augustus, Emperor of Rome,
 conqueror of the German tribes!
 Master of the Danube! All of Rome
 salutes you!

ns of Rome line the way. Some cheer, but most
 let. And that silence is unnerving. Then:

VOICE

Romans do not pay tribute!

at causes a landslide of yelling. Commodus
 dead ahead as they're now forced to run a
 et of outraged citizens. Finally his chariot
 up speed as it continues through the forum
 the palace on the Palatine Hill.

IMPERIAL PALACE - DUSK

Commodus paces like caged animal, Falco walks
 fro oddly trying to keep up with him.
 a sits stretching her legs; after the long
 he looks exhausted. A slave pours wine.

FALCO

The Senate is out to sink you. I
 swear it, Caesar, your generosity
 is being repaid with public
 attacks on your honor. Your
 enemies want you weak enough so by
 the first of Janus when you must
 be confirmed the Senate will be
 able to deny you.

COMMODUS

How can they? Who else is there?
 I have no heir...

LUCILLA
 e point, dear brother,
 r' is the Senate. And
 e, they know it.

FALCO
 ke this lightly, Caesar.
 to abolish the
 ip If they do you and
 er will be executed.
 ot to plan your moves as
 / as if you were going to

WHEEL - NIGHT, DAYS LATER

From a rut and onto a road of
 onal lava blocks.

- DAY

Narcissus wakes and looks across
 tremendous BANG the entire side of
 y as it's unhinged by SOLDIERS.

lined up facing a rank of soldiers
 ar-point. Narcissus now sees
 part of a convoy of four; all
 the edge of a forest.

JUBA
 Rome? Are we just going
 executed?

NARCISSUS
 n't... if this is Rome...

ed wrist-to-wrist with the German
 s are CHAINED IN PAIRS. Juba
 call blonde German WARRIOR.

OPENS FAST --

with feathers woven into their
 n from the far end of the path and
 rail that leads between a double
 Cries, hoots and cheers surround
 IBLE MASS OF HUMANITY and at the
 here's this unnatural GLOW.

HT

he center of a VAST ARENA that's
 h trees to imitate a forest.

From the tops of the sheer twelve foot perimeter walls, banks of seats slope away tier after tier until, at the very tops of the seating are arch after arch, each framing a marble statue of a different Roman emperor.

THE PRISONERS...

gawk at the enormous proportions of the building: it's the COLOSSEUM of Rome. Looking back at them are FIFTY THOUSAND FANS - And as one, like some surreal canned sound track they all LAUGH.

Then to a fanfare of horns and drums a corpulent, self-important man rises. This is JERSES - head of the Roman Circus. Jersees turns to the imperial box, but the marble throne-like seat which has a carved wolf relief, is EMPTY.

JERSES

On this dawn! In celebration of the New Caesar, Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus' glorious triumph over the German tribes I declare these games - which will run without interruption to the month of Janus - open to one and all!

HOWLS and CHEERS from the audience - many in the 'best seats' (nearest the arena) rise and directly applaud Jersees.

NARCISSUS

Searching the row of prisoners he sees Juba staring dead ahead.

JERSES

In sacrifice for Rome that the world might know the new Emperor's love for his citizens, during these games two hundred pairs of gladiators will fight to the death..!

(deafening cheers)

One thousand criminals will be devoured by wild beasts... there shall be venationes! Battles betwixt elephants and rhinoceroses; bears and bulls; Leopards and lions; exotic animals never seen in Rome - captured by our legions in their triumph in Africa - will be hunted to the death!

Narcissus is staggered - his head pivots around at the frantic, blood-lusting crowd.

ARCHERS...

emerge from a door in a wall of the Colosseum, bows strung over their shoulders, each carries a small jug and each archer approaches a pair of chained-together prisoners. As they DAUB PAINT on the prisoners' arms - a particular NUMBER for each pair - spectators rise, pointing at different pairs, some jotting notes. Juba and the Blonde get daubed with a red 'III'.

SLAVE #1

Wagers! Make your wagers - visit the Blue Betting booths! Remember the number of your favorite pair!

SLAVE #2

Red Booths - bet at the Red Booths! The Red Booths always give you the best odds! The Red Booths - open until curfew!

A young, SURLY-LOOKING ARCHER gets to Narcissus and the German. He snorts his disdain, then daubs a black Roman numeral V onto the German's arm - but when he paints Narcissus he decks the archer with his free hand. The audience CHEERS and there's a spurt of note-taking in the stands.

FROM THE CHEAP SEATS --

a lanky GREEK, PROXIMO PALINDROMOS, instantly flashes his dark eyes down into the mass of prisoners.

PROXIMO'S POV

Hard to see anything from this far up. He starts to turn away when the German Warrior steps aside and as Narcissus is revealed his ROMAN EAGLE FLASHES.

AND PROXIMO

suddenly very interested... Quickly he looks across to the opposite side of the arena where a pencil-thin man in a dark green toga sits beside Jerjes, also scrutinizing the prisoners. He looks RIGHT UP AT PROXIMO. The man is LYKAS.

INT. COLOSSEUM

Narcissus is shoved down an immense stone hallway mad with activity.

Juba is rushed along twenty feet ahead. Behind the huge doors are drawn closed by two burly slaves but at the last second they stop to let Proximo in.

RAMP

Narcissus herded with the others down a steep ramp. They pass...

-- huge baskets of FLOWERS being ground to juice and dumped into a sluice.

-- the-side of a cage; as Narcissus passes a leopard SLAMS against the bars.

-- Narcissus is pushed on, deeper into the guts of the Colosseum. He gets a fast glimpse of a room where BUTCHERS chop out slabs of meat. Bleeding ribs dangle from hooks...

-- SLAVES charge in opposite directions along a tunnel yanking pulley ropes as a CAGED BEAR rises from below.

-- But now they're pushed deeper into the darkening 'basement' until finally they reach --

THE 'HOLE'

Slaves wait with oil lamps to light their way as they run in a semi-squat beneath the low stone ceiling. Prisoners GASP in the choking air while around them come the banshee wails of other PRISONERS. Finally they stop and Narcissus and Juba come face-to-face.

JUBA

Fight! Feohtan!

But Juba is knocked down by two guards - one rears back to spear him when Narcissus throws himself in front of Juba...

PROXIMO

Stop! Stop!

The guard instantly backs off as torches converge lighting up the claustrophobic tunnel. Proximo steps into the light as Narcissus stands. Then he takes hold of Narcissus' Roman Eagle.

PROXIMO

Is this yours?

Narcissus GRABS the eagle and shoves Proximo back.

Proximo nods to slaves and Narcissus' chain is held up against the wall and with two blows the links are broken with a hammer. Narcissus is yanked back the way he came. He just has time to look over his shoulder to see Juba shoved into the hole and the door SLAMS behind them.

MAIN HALL

Exhausted, Narcissus is rushed back up the ramp into the main hall where Proximo waits. Then a side door opens and OUTSIDE LIGHT explodes in like a flashgun.

EXT. COLOSSEUM - DAY

Narcissus is led - chained - into the streets, armed slaves urge him along as ahead Proximo rides in a sedan chair.

- FOOD AND DRINK VENDORS shout and wave samples of their wares;

- TICKET SCALPERS hold up IVORY TICKETS yelling out Colosseum seat numbers;

- BOOKMAKERS stand on tables - some with RED headbands, some with BLUE - screaming out names of various gladiators and indicating their 'odds' with fingers as citizens queue up to bet;

- RELIC HAWKERS hold up pieces of gladiatorial armor yelling the name of the dead gladiator and the number of his victories;

- Lion paws and leopard ears are touted as potency medicines;

- WHORES bare-chested with wildly painted breasts line the road taking customers into the alleys...

EXT. PROXIMO'S GLADIATORIAL SCHOOL - DAY

They approach ornate double wooden gates with carved action scenes of gladiators in battle.

INT. PROXIMO'S INSULA, GLADIATOR SCHOOL - DAY

Narcissus enters with two powerful armed SLAVES who unchain him and give him water and bread. Proximo sits behind his 'desk' which is a slab of thick rose volcanic rock polished to a high luster, its corners supported by salvaged marble BUSTS painted in the original garish Greek style: faces pink, hair brown or blond, eyes white with brown or blue irises.

Gaudy mosaics of gladiatorial battles hang on the wall over his table. Narcissus eyeballs the setup: everything but pink flamingoes.

With Proximo is ADONIS THE BOXER: a tall, thick man, face deeply scarred, nose pulverized. The other is an albino dwarf - DALA. Dala has Jimmy Winters-white hair and almost crimson eyes.

Proximo stares at Narcissus for a time as Dala pours him a cup of wine. Finally, Proximo drinks.

PROXIMO

Welcome to Rome.

(pause)

Who are you?

Instead of answering, Narcissus holds out his cup.

PROXIMO

You're a legate in the Roman army.

Huh?... and you act like one.

What was your crime?

NARCISSUS

I killed too many barbarians.

PROXIMO

I'm a Greek, thank you. And I was brought up believing Romans were the barbarians.

(to slave)

Give our new colleague some of the Cretan white. Relax, tell me everything, I'm your friend.

Dala fills Narcissus' cup. After a second of hesitation Narcissus drinks... and it's good.

NARCISSUS

Who the hell are you?

PROXIMO

I am the man who might save your life - give you a bit more life at any rate. I am Proximo Palindromos head of this gladiatorial school which is named after me. I own this school and everything that's in it.

(w/a laugh)

You're in it! But why? What did a Roman general do to get himself condemned to the Colosseum?

(MORE)

PROXIMO (CONT'D)

Understand, we usually get corn thieves and pick pockets. Please, I separated you from the others because...

(sniffs loudly)

... my nose tells me you've been condemned for important reasons.

NARCISSUS

Condemned? Aren't I owed a trial before being condemned?

PROXIMO

General, all I know is you have been condemned to the Colosseum, and a trial is nowhere to be seen.

NARCISSUS

Impossible! Every citizen has a right to trial - this is Rome!

One of the attending SLAVES chuckles and is hushed by a glare from Proximo.

PROXIMO

In Rome, you will discover, all things - especially the most unthinkable - are possible. What were you charged with?

Now Narcissus won't talk.

PROXIMO

Well, it probably doesn't matter. Probably you'll be dead tomorrow. But it might matter tonight because I'm going to plead with Jerses head of the circus to have you instituted as a gladiator immediately. He's a loathsome pig but in this business one doesn't get to chose one's friends. Your business too, maybe? Oh yes, the arena slaves took this from you. It's yours, isn't it?

A slave hands Narcissus' small box of ancestors to Proximo who hands it to Narcissus.

NARCISSUS

Thank you. What is going to happen tomorrow? Exactly?

PROXIMO

You are to be killed, exactly. They'll give you a sporting chance, but just enough to make your murder... entertaining. Romans like to mix their metaphors: laughter with their executions, you know? If you survive, though, you will become a gladiator. A gladiator at least gets a fair fight.

NARCISSUS

Death is a very light thing for you.

PROXIMO

Death is... everything for me. Now you have to go to your cell, and I to dicker with Jerses... you'll be fed well. I want you to be fit as you can be; I want you to win for me tomorrow! I want all my gladiators to win and be happy! Besides, I've never owned a Roman general before.

EXT. GLADIATOR SCHOOL YARD - DAY

Narcissus is led through the yard - notes Adonis on his right and Dala following along behind. Two armed slaves flank them in a tight formation. Dala and Adonis watch Narcissus with a mix of curiosity and awe; Adonis knows what he's thinking.

ADONIS

Escape is a impossible, general. First you have these guards who will not hesitate to kill you. Then you have the Praetorian Guard, and then the Rome city police...

DALA

The vigiles, Vigilant Patrols. They're everywhere... you don't know if maybe even your best friend could be a spy.

GLADIATORS range around the walled-in open space - like a mini-arena - working out in the sunshine. Some lift WEIGHTS made from crude chunks of iron or rock; there's a primitive BOW-FLEX DEVICE made from real bows. Bored armed GUARDS range the walkway atop the wall.

A PIECE OF CLOTH WEIGHTED DOWN WITH A ROCK flutters over the wall and thuds in the square and there's a short scramble as gladiators rush for it. Finally the 'note' is passed on to Adonis.

ADONIS

Crassus, it's for you.

A tall, handsome gladiator: "CRASSUS THE SPARTAN" whose hair is woven with TINY SILVER BELLS, stands beside Adonis in expectation.

CRASSUS

Come on! Tell me what it says!

ADONIS

(reading)

"I dream of your muscles, dear Crassus!

(howls from the others)

"... and pray the one between your legs is as large as the one between your ears is small!"

Hoots as Crassus grabs the 'note' away from Adonis.

DALA

For a price Proximo can manage a meeting for any lady...

A gladiator with Bad Teeth moves up to intercept Narcissus: The man's lost teeth are replaced with glued-in bits of colored stone. He looks Narcissus over, scoffs and returns to his friends. As they pass along a wall it dips to waste level over a sheer drop. Narcissus stops at the view.

FAR BELOW

... is the FORUM OF ROME with its bustling street and squares and magnificent buildings.

From here Narcissus can see the Roman Temples: that of the Divine Claudius; Venus and Rome; Mars Ultor; the Temple of Minerva; of Peace; the Divine Julius; of Castor and Pollux; of The Vestal Virgins. Each like a miniature Parthenon seems to faintly GLOW.

FURTHER...

Beyond are the Domus of the upper classes and the insula of the poor. Actually overwhelmed by the sight; perhaps it gives Narcissus hope.

INT. CELL - DUSK

TIGHT ON the ceramic FACES OF HIS ANCESTORS looking like a row of hollow caricatures. They seem to be watching...

NARCISSUS

who sits in the shadows of his cell that's twenty feet square. There are two barred windows, one on the rear wall and another on the side wall. Finally Narcissus rises... he takes up one of the ceramics, snaps a piece off on the side of the table to get a nice sharp edge. He rolls back his sleeves and starts to open the vein of his left wrist.

FROM ABOVE Dala shouts down from a small window in the roof. The cell door flies back and TWO SLAVES tackle Narcissus. Dala enters followed by Proximo. Dala pushes one of the slaves aside and grabs Narcissus' wrist.

NARCISSUS

Take your hands off me animal!

PROXIMO

Chain him.

The slaves immediately bind Narcissus' wrists with a leather strap that's locked with a metal cleat.

PROXIMO

Sorry but I have to get at least one fight out of you otherwise I won't even get back the cost of the bribe I had to pay the arena slaves to get you here. I know what you're trying to do: kill yourself and trust in the Roman tradition of justice that the emperor will let your family survive and keep their lands. The only thing you have accomplished is to prove you're a very important individual. You make me feel good about my investment! And that puking pig Jerses - he won't even discuss you. Both of you have clamped mouths! But I love all my fighters - I'll find out about your family. And about you. That I promise.

NARCISSUS

I refuse to be your slave. I refuse -

PROXIMO
- to fight? We'll see...

Proximo leaves and the door shuts behind him.
Narcissus is left chained in the dark.

INT. GLADIATOR WAGON - MORNING

The side is a broad barred opening like an animal circus wagon designed to show-off the creatures inside. The gladiators watch Narcissus: various men, all colors, all showing battle scars...

GANG KIDS dressed like gladiators chase the wagon shouting: "Gladiator - Hey, Gladiator!" "Crassus! Crassus The Spartan! Throw us a head" "Hey - Bad Teeth! Who you going to skewer today!?"

Most catch up to the wagon slogging along in rush-hour traffic and hammer the sides with their FISTS. Fascinated, Narcissus leans close to the bars - LITTLE KID FACES peer back.

BLOND KID
You're new! Hey! A new one!

MANY KIDS
You're dead! They're gonna rip your guts out! You're dead - dead! Dead guts!

Then they pass the senate steps - Senator Gaius and an AGED SENATOR who seems from another era, GRACCHUS, address a crowd. The kids peel away from the wagon and shove through the audience. Narcissus presses to the bars for a good look.

BAD TEETH
Friends of yours?

The gladiators laugh. But as they pass Narcissus watches the senators.

GAIUS
Shall we allow Commodus to turn the labor of Marcus Aurelius upside down? Are we Romans or dogs!?

The KIDS START BARKING. The cart veers toward the enormous flank of the Colosseum. A FAT PERSIAN TICKET SCALPER and his two young SONS man a table holding ivory Colosseum tickets like fans of cards, shouting seats and prices.

FOUR ROME WHORES ending their day laugh and wave at the cart. A CUTE WHORE in a yellow wig blows them a kiss. SOUNDS OF THE COLOSSEUM CROWD RISE OVER...

EXT. COLOSSEUM ARENA - DAY

FEET of the MOB in the Colosseum stamping as their chanting VOICES echo in shock waves through the giant marble chamber.

AND COMMODUS

Standing for the crowd. He's surrounded by members of the Imperial Household - Lucilla on his right beside Falco. Commodus sits, seems nervous.

LUCILLA

Don't you think you should at least wave?

COMMODUS

Why? Then they'll notice when I'm gone. Well. I'm making a public appearance aren't I?

ARENA

GLADIATORS parade single file through the arena. They strut their stuff: flexing their muscles, gesturing obscenely as they receive the cat-calls of young girls. SATURNUS - a muscular gladiator with waist-length wavy hair stops to bask in the animal howls of the crowd.

NARCISSUS

stands inside a heavily guarded double door watching the action. As the 'Proximo gladiators' come in off the field they sit on blocks of stone lining the wall. Then, Narcissus spots Commodus and moves closer to the opening.

Saturnus stops directly in front of the Imperial Box, lifts his hand in the Roman salute - which was the model for the Fascist's salute.

SATURNUS

Caesar! Those who are about to die, salute you!

It's the cue for the crowd to go WILD. Again Commodus looks around at this vast arena. He tentatively makes a broad wave and instead of getting the expected universal cheers some LOUD BOOS jab up at him from the cheap seats. Commodus is outraged.

FALCO
Caesar, ignore them.

COMMODUS
Ignore that!? The sooner we leave
this disgusting place the better.

FALCO
At least stay for the running of
the animals. You are paying for
it you know...

A set of tall doors are pulled back by pairs of
slaves and ANIMALS RUSH INTO THE ARENA. WILDEBEESTS
- HYENAS - ANTELOPE - ZEBRAS - WILD ASSES - BEARS -
JACKALS - even a LONE HIPPO... blunderer off the
smooth marble walls in terrified confusion.
Commodus seems physically struck.

FALCO
The money was set aside for your
father's triumph. The people
expect it.

COMMODUS
Gods of hell! This must cost a
fortune! How many days is this
going to go on?

FALCO
Until your confirmation date.

Commodus looks back out on the arena where every
animal must look like a heap of cash.

COMMODUS
A month! The treasury is
bleeding... and these pigs expect
me to sponsor their amusement
while they boo me?

Commodus turns and his entourage follows him out.

NARCISSUS

moves closer to the opening, trying to see through
the dust and animals but gets shoved back. The
other gladiators sit on stones, backs to the action.
There's an 'imminent feeling' like soldiers gathered
in a trench before battle. Narcissus turns back to
the arena.

MOUNTED HUNTERS --

Carrying javelins charge into the arena.

And while they corner animals and impale them a LONE MAN - a 'Colosseum Clown' rushes across the sands with a furious BEAR hot on his heels.

The Colosseum Clown reaches the far end of the arena and 'runs' up the slick marble side using his momentum. As the bear lunges for him he flips off the wall, over the bear and starts running the other way. The crowd goes wild for it.

LOWER CELLS/THE HOLE...

ABSOLUTE BLACKNESS. A solid door pulls back and faint light reveals Juba collapsed in the filth of the cave-like cell. Drenched with perspiration he gasps in the 'fresh' air and like the other prisoners looks nearly asphyxiated. Arena Slaves poke torches at them.

ARENA SLAVE

Come on! Time to meet Pluto!

GLADIATOR AREA

As Dala jabbers on the PRISONERS are rushed up from the depths of the Colosseum.

DALA

I usually fight women gladiators or other dwarfs. Sometimes I ride into battle on an ostrich. Women are ruthless! Ostriches can break your arm with a single kick!

Narcissus is yanked to his feet by armed slaves and chained to the German Warrior who bears the same blue paint smear as he. They study one another, brothers in pain. Narcissus searches the faces and sees Juba is one of the last men being pulled out of the 'hole' by a chain. Bad Teeth looks up:

BAD TEETH

They're going to bet on you:
whoever dies last wins! So long
general...

AT THE DOOR

The prisoners are lined up as the last of the dead animals are dragged off. A slave dumps short gladius swords from a sack the prisoners scramble to arm themselves. At the last second Proximo shoves through and grabs hold of Narcissus' arm.

PROXIMO

Legate Narcissus Meridas, general
of the Spanish Felix Legions!

(MORE)

PROXIMO (CONT'D)

I'm proud to have you in my school!

(picks up a sword)

Now, show them what you can do!

NARCISSUS

I'm not a gladiator. I refuse to fight.

PROXIMO

Then, you'll die....

(off his silence)

Just, know this: because you asked I asked: I'm sorry but...

A HORN BLOWS and the Colosseum Slaves herd the prisoners out in a rush.

PROXIMO

... the emperor has executed your family!

Narcissus is YANKED ahead.

EXT. ARENA

Narcissus is so staggered by this news he seems barely able to walk.

JUBA

Narcissus! A sword! Get a sword!

As the prisoners are double-timed around the arena spectators rise like a Dodger Wave, shouting and pointing out pairs - money swaps hands. Arena Slaves circle quickly with rakes smoothing the sand over the animal blood.

JERSES

Citizens! Make your final wagers!

Jerses unrolls a scroll. As he speaks ARCHERS line up against the wall directly beneath Jerses facing the prisoners.

JERSES

Prisoners, you have been found guilty of offenses against The Fatherland: In the name of Caesar Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus and the Senate of Rome, you have been condemned to the arena, beneath the beneath. Fight well - live long!

NARCISSUS

barely has time to absorb this when the archers take aim. PANICKED prisoners trip over their own chains, colliding with each other.

The German crosses in front of Narcissus and is hit square in the chest with an arrow. Instinctively Narcissus tries to help the German but the man slides out of his arms and crumples dead in the sand. Narcissus looks UP as the crowd cheers...

ANDABATAE ENTER...

They're gladiators with faces hidden by helmets; carrying THRUSTING SPEARS they look like EXECUTIONER ROBOTS.

Narcissus sees that one man of each chained-together pair has been killed and then that Juba is still alive. Each Andabatus squares off with a surviving prisoner.

JUBA

Narcissus - fight! Fight!

The crowd ROARS as the Andabatae attack. The 'joke' is Narcissus - like the other prisoners - has to drag a dead man around while fighting for his life.

Narcissus dodges the first blow but the movement yanks his chain taut and he falls - barely rolls clear of the next blow. Spectators CHEER and LAUGH; the Andabatus circles keeping Narcissus stretched to the limit of his chain.

Juba lurches, nicks the Andabatus and has time to grab the sword of the dead Blonde German.

JUBA

General!

Juba heaves the sword toward Narcissus, turns to parry away the Andabatus. The crowd HOWLS...

Narcissus sees the sword is within grabbing range but he still won't go for it. Then the crowd SHOUTS...

JUBA GOES DOWN...

The Andabatus straddles the badly wounded man, salutes the audience and kills him. Narcissus now sees he's the last prisoner left alive.

Narcissus' Andabatus lunges and as Narcissus quickly pulls out of range he falls forward foot coiled in the chain. Now it looks like it's all over - the crowd goes wild with expectation.

The Andabatus raises his weapon over Narcissus as spectators poke their chest with their thumbs to symbolize they want Narcissus killed. He looks to Jerse for orders.

NARCISSUS

sees Juba dead, his blood in the sand. And suddenly something happens to him - with every ounce of energy left Narcissus grabs the sword, and CHOPS though the ACHILLES TENDON of the Andabatus' left leg. The Andabatus DROPS as Narcissus lunges out with the sword and the man FALLS on the blade.

It's over. Narcissus rolls on his side to face up at Jerse who still stands about to give the death command - his mouth DROPS.

AND PROXIMO

got those Don King Eyes... Adonis and Dala come forward.

PROXIMO

Did you see that!? Did you see!?
I knew he was a fighter! A real
fighter!

THE AUDIENCE.--

GOES WILD. Especially those in the cheap seats. Narcissus stands with the chain to the dead German in his hand. Then he looks over to where Juba has fallen in the sand. A man dressed in A COSTUME OF BLACK SCALES and a monster head walks to each prisoner administering a coup de grâce by clubbing them with a big HAMMER. He's 'PLUTO'.

Narcissus drags the chain with the body of the German behind him until he reaches Juba's side. Pluto sees Narcissus protecting Juba's body and decides to take a 'pass'.

Finally, exhausted, Narcissus drops to his knees in the burning sand. Lowering his head as cheers of the crowd surround him...

IMPERIAL ENTRANCE, COLOSSEUM

At ground level at the dead end of a long hall Lucilla watches through an ornate stone grate.

Of course, she's seen everything.

TRIBUUS

Lady, are you coming?

She's startled to find Tribuus has come looking for her. She nods, shoves past and he follows her down the hall without a single backward glance.

INT. IMPERIAL 'CHAIR' - LATER AFTERNOON

Commodus and Lucilla ride along in silence, Praetorian Guard walking ahead to part the crowd. As they pass the Senate, Commodus points to a clutch of CITIZENS gathered on the steps.

COMMODUS

They're talking about me.

Lucilla gives him the hard stare. But then all the citizens turn to watch the Imperial Chair pass.

COMMODUS

They hate me, they really hate me don't they?

LUCILLA

Maybe you should get married. Pick one of your cousins, it would demonstrate a profound stability.

Commodus puts his hand on her leg.

COMMODUS

What about you?

They just stare at each other. As he talks he continues to feel under her toga to her hip. She tries to remain amused.

COMMODUS

I should at least have you, don't you think?

LUCILLA

If you get me pregnant with a boy he'll be a double direct heir and will end up killing you for the throne.

He freezes - absolutely turned off - and takes away his hand.

COMMODUS

Did Narcissus die today? Wasn't this his day to die?

LUCILLA

I'm sure I don't know.

Finally he removes his hand and leans out the opening to Tribuus who rides alongside.

COMMODUS

Tribuus, what happened in the arena? Was Narcissus killed?

TRIBUUS

He must have been. He was on the list of prisoners to be executed.

LUCILLA

No one in Rome has even heard of him. Do you want to remind those few in the Senate who have? The whole sordid thing is far beneath your position to begin with. Forget about him.

COMMODUS

Let some time pass... then ask, quietly, without anyone knowing it comes from me.

TRIBUUS

Leave it to me, Caesar.

INT. NARCISSUS' CELL - LATE AFTERNOON

Narcissus has drunk himself unconscious and lies face down on the table. The door swings open and Proximo enters with an armed guard and COS, a handsome young man who looks like a student. As the light sweeps in through the open door Narcissus blinks awake.

PROXIMO

Narcissus Meridas, general of the Spanish VII, famed Felix Legions. I'm proud to have you in my school!

Narcissus staggers to his feet and crosses to the rear window. He leans against the bars and gulps cool air.

PROXIMO

General, do you realize what happened out there today?

NARCISSUS

I didn't get killed and everyone else did.

PROXIMO

That's one way to look at it.

COS

You won an impossible fight. You got the attention of the crowd, legate...

PROXIMO

This is Cos, this precocious young man. A scribe for the *Daily Action*.¹ I've invited him to write a small piece about you...

COS

I'm mentioning you in tomorrow's athlete's section, legate. So, I'd love to know your birth sign; it effects how people bet. And perhaps you could tell me a bit about... well, who are you?

Narcissus looks from one to the other then back to his view of Rome which looks like lead in shadows.

NARCISSUS

I don't have a birth sign...

Cos looks to Proximo who starts to speak but realizes the interview is over...

INT. NARCISSUS' CELL - LATE AFTERNOON

Narcissus crouches in the corner slowly sipping his wine staring at the 'faces' of his ancestors.

NARCISSUS

Janus, God of passages, I know you exist...

(pause)

I beg you open the door for Selene, Manto, and my little Themis to the land of our ancestors. I have no fit offering for the task I ask, but if you save my ladies one day I will find a sacrifice worthy of you.

Dala's face peers in from above.

DALA

Don't let Proximo push you around. Proximo must, by law, give you a third of everything he makes off you outside the arena. Popular gladiators get rich!

Narcissus grabs his wine jug and throws it at Dala who leaps out of sight. Then Narcissus picks up a stone and stands over the images of his ancestors.

ON HIS ANCESTORS...

One by one he SMASHES EACH FACE. SOUNDS OF THE COLOSSEUM RISE OVER as if cheering him on...

INT. COLOSSEUM, GLADIATOR AREA - MORNING

A SWORD drops in the dirt. Narcissus looks up to find Proximo with an Arena Slave who holds a sack of swords.

PROXIMO

We're calling you "Narcissus The Good." It's in the *Daily Action*.

A CHEER from the crowd and Narcissus glances toward the arena.

HE SEES...

Crassus has speared a panther which drops, clawing hopelessly at the blade stuck in its throat. To resounding cheers, Crassus holds up his arms, playing to his audience. Then with a huge show he straddles the cat and kills it with a dagger - the crowd erupts...

NARCISSUS

picks the sword up so fast the point almost catches Proximo in the face. Proximo straightens, scowls and moves off. Bad Teeth chuckles. But when he gets the cold stare from Narcissus he turns away, chuckling to himself.

ARENA

Narcissus faces a Hoplomachi. The Hoplomachi looks completely protected in lead grey armor. He carries a round shield and a long sword. Narcissus walks slowly toward him and the audience hushes.

NARCISSUS

Surrender or I'll kill you!

People just crack-up...

SPECTATOR

Narcissus The Good!

As one the audience howls throwing trash down into the arena.

Narcissus drops his shield, grips his sword with both hands - feints - the Hoplomachi misses left and Narcissus comes down full force on the man's helmet. Narcissus' sword SPLITS THE HELMET AND STAYS THERE. The Hoplomachi takes two more steps and drops dead.

Narcissus turns and strides back the way he came ignoring the crowd as it GOES WILD.

INT. GLADIATOR WAGON - LATE AFTERNOON

Narcissus sits rubbing his wrist where he's cuffed. The others watching him. Crassus hands him a small jar and a rag. Narcissus wipes his wrist - and it stings. Bad Teeth chuckles. Now, heading away from the Colosseum are the Four Whores, today the Cute Whore wears a BLUE WIG; they blow kisses...

EXT. FORUM - LATE AFTERNOON

Outside the Senate Tribuus with ten Praetorian Guard face down an angry demonstration.

INT. SENATE - LATE AFTERNOON

Commodus faces the challenging, stoic wall of Senators in their pure white togas. Falco sits prominently near the front. From outside come the sounds of the mob.

COMMODUS

Senators. There was no more fair man than my father. A man of learning who dreamed the fondest of all Roman dreams: restoring the Republic. Still, my father ruled. And though I seek only to fulfil his dream, I too must rule. For despite the gossip of philosophers men are not born free; they must have freedom given them by the state.

GRACCHUS

Are you alleging, Caesar, that our citizens' desire for the Republic is infantile?

COMMODUS

Men who believe they can truly be free, like it or not, are necessarily children.

FALCO

And like children everywhere they
scream "freedom" the most when
they desire it least. I beg you,
please continue, Caesar.

COMMODUS

At the opening of the month of
Janus, I will ask this noble body
to confirm my emperorship...

Gracchus points out toward the street.

GRACCHUS

We don't have to wait for the
month of Janus, the people deny
you already!

COMMODUS

It is you, Gaius and you Gracchus
who incite the people until they
are out of control!

GAIUS

It is not the Senate's duty to
control the people, rather to
allow them the right to control
us!

FALCO

Gentlemen, gentlemen: our emperor
has come here humbly to address us
about his confirmation...

VOICE

If there is a confirmation!

FALCO

... and I insist we show him the
respect and honor he is due.

GRACCHUS

Caesar, what are you doing about
this growing grain shortage? If
there is unrest now, what happens
when there is no bread at all?

GAIUS

And that treaty! By giving the
Germans money and letting them
remain on the Danube at arms do we
not run the risk of essentially
financing their next invasion of
Italy?

GRACCHUS

Caesar, the Senate must answer to
the people...

EXT. SENATE.- LATE AFTERNOON

As Commodus comes out protected by a line of
Praetorian Guard; he's scared, but smiles like a
politician.

TRIBUUS

Make way! Make way for Caesar!
Son of Marcus Aurelius!

VOICE

To hell with the son! Give us
back the father!

The crowd breaks into a chant for Marcus Aurelius.
As Commodus and Tribuus move faster to get clear of
the crowd people actually begin THROWING TRASH.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE, PALATINE HILL - EVENING

Lucilla watches as Commodus heaves statuary.
paintings, even furniture into a heap on the central
room floor; slaves scurry to pick it up.

LUCILLA

Those are priceless sculptures!

COMMODUS

I want every single thing that
belonged to my father out of this
house! If it's worth something
then sell it!

Falco enters with Tribuus. Commodus rages at him.

COMMODUS

It's disgusting! Animals! I had
to come here under armed guard.
Slaves - get this junk out of my
sight.

LUCILLA

Commodus is heaving out every
thing that belonged to our father.
Except that he can't heave out his
ghost.

Commodus hits her hard across the face. She
staggers back against the edge of a fountain.

COMMODUS

Shut up! This is no joke! I am
no joke! You understand me!

Only her anger keeps back her tears.

LUCILLA

Yes... brother.

For a moment everyone is overwhelmed - and Falco steps between them. Lucilla sits, washes the corner of her mouth from the fountain.

FALCO

Gracchus and Gaius are inciting the crowd by holding you up for comparison. You must kill that ghost that's haunting you.

Commodus turns and comes nearly nose-to-nose with a statue of Marcus Aurelius. He grabs a slave.

COMMODUS

I told you to get that bust out of my sight!

The hapless slave hugs the statue but no way will it budge.

SLAVE

Caesar - it outweighs me!

TRIBUUS

Guards - help us here.

COMMODUS

Throw it down into the streets! Down into the Forum. If it's my father they want then give him to them!

FALCO

Yes. You know, that's not a bad idea.

COMMODUS

Maybe it'll crush Gaius.

FALCO

I'm serious.

COMMODUS

So am I..

FALCO

We can crush Gaius another way. What if you do throw something to the people they really want? Make them a gift of food.

COMMODUS

Give away food?

FALCO

Sacks of grain, even bread. I own the grain licenses for the military, I can arrange to divert a shipment bound for the army of the Danube.

COMMODUS

Take grain away from the army?

FALCO

Make a gift to the people. It's your money anyway so it's only fair.

Lucilla seems very interested.

LUCILLA

And make a huge deal out of it... If you want the people to truly remember the gesture, that is at least until the first of Janus, it must be an event, an occasion of celebration.

FALCO

She's right about that. It's going to be damned expensive so better get your money's worth.

COMMODUS

How about in the forum. Right in front of the Senate.

LUCILLA

If I may be so bold...

COMMODUS

For the gods, spit it out!

LUCILLA

Why not do it in the Colosseum?

Hard to tell exactly what Commodus thinks of this.

LUCILLA

When Julius Caesar overthrew the Republic he held massive games at Circus Maximus to divert the people. By the time they came home from all their fun... they were living in a dictatorship.

That gets him interested. Tribuus and the guards begin to wrestle the statue of Marcus Aurelius out of the hall.

INT. NARCISSUS' CELL - DAWN, DAYS LATER

The door bangs back and Narcissus wakes. Adonis enters with two guards. Narcissus gets up from the floor where he's been sleeping on a blanket.

ADONIS

General...

Other cells can be heard clanking aside, men cursing and laughing. Far off ROOSTERS CROW. Adonis steps out and Proximo pokes his head in.

PROXIMO

Like an animal. I give you one of the best cells - look at you, on the ground. And the crowd - you win and they hate you because you never ask them for permission to kill your opponent! You could win the wooden sword if the crowd loves you enough! The wooden sword! It's freedom - you listening to me? gladiator has the chance of winning it... technically.

Narcissus just shoves past.

PROXIMO

This isn't a war, you know! Have some fun with it!

EXT. SCHOOL COURTYARD - DAWN

Narcissus pauses to watch the other gladiators herded together from the pitiful cells, some naked pulling on ragged togas. In the yard steaming cauldrons of food are prepared by slaves.

Dragged from his cell a new, young gladiator - VEDNAS - weeps and screams that he doesn't want to die.

Bad Teeth crawls out of his cell like a bear, punches Vednas in the mouth to shut him up and moves on before the guards can get to him.

Already dressed, Crassus kneels before a crude stone alter, praying to his God.

INT. GLADIATOR WAGON - MORNING

Silence from the gladiators as the wagon squeaks and thumps through Rome. The Gang-Kids race alongside, shouting. Bad Teeth reaches under his rough toga and comes up with a small jug of wine. He hands it to Narcissus.

BAD TEETH

This is my God.

Narcissus eyeballs the jug, then takes it and turns away from the rest to drink. The others swap looks. Gathering his courage, Vednas crawls near.

VEDNAS

They say, you are a general...

Narcissus looks him over a moment, says nothing. But Vednas pours forth in desperation.

VEDNAS

I don't belong here! I'm Vednas the scribe! I can read and write Etruscan, Greek; I can read the pictures of the great Pharaohs and the tongue of Cyrus the Younger! I once translated the whole Epic of Gilgamesh from Babylonian into Greek for the library at Ephesus! My ancestors were scribes at the Great Library of Alexandria!

BAD TEETH

I'll bet he can scream in ten languages!

Howls from the others. Narcissus remains unmoved.

VEDNAS

I never bothered anyone. I had a corner, out on the verge where the insula and the domus meet. Anyone with good taste came to me to write their letters. Love letters were my specialty! General, I can compose like no other man!

BAD TEETH

Yeah, but pretty soon you'll be decomposing!

More laughs... Vednas gets desperate.

VEDNAS

Please! I was condemned for over charging for a document! They need bodies for the arena! I did nothing! Help me!

Narcissus has another sip of wine.

NARCISSUS

You want to live?

(pause)

Kill.

INT. COLOSSEUM ARENA - DAY/MONTAGE:

Narcissus circles a 'THRACIAN' GLADIATOR: small round shield with a curved scythe-like sword. The Thracian whips the sword overhead in a circle with enormous agility... Narcissus watches and then circles in the opposite direction. In a flash he races at the Thracian...

NEW ANGLE

That scythe-sword spinning off into the ether.

THE THRACIAN...

Dead in the sand as Narcissus walks away paying no attention to the cheering crowd and getting some BOOS as a result.

COLOSSEUM ARENA - ANOTHER DAY

On a 'COLOSSUS OF RHODES' design on a shield showing an image of the legendary copper giant.

A RHODIAN faces Narcissus. He wears a shiny lorica segmentata designed from copper, armed with a splay-edged sword. Narcissus approaches him, this time carrying his small shield. The Rhodian slashes at him and Narcissus deflects the blow with his shield. As the crowd HOWLS they crash together...

THE COPPER SHIELD...

sticking on edge in the sand, the giant - feet up... beside the body of the Rhodian. Narcissus again strides away, victorious.

COLOSSEUM ARENA - ANOTHER DAY

A MYRMIDON gladiator in black leather... 'Antenna' poke from his leather helmet, and a symbol of an ant on his shield - rears backward as Narcissus fells him with a powerful blow...

COLLOSSEUM ARENA - ANOTHER DAY

A MIRMILLONES - a gladiator with scale-like armor and a fish-shield - tumbles dead in the sand...

AND THE CROWD...

Cheering, stamping their feet.

AND NARCISSUS

Once again striding off the sand. But this time he stops, turns and looks back at the crowd.

HIS POV

The uninhibited proletariat in the upper seats howl. Their area is littered with trash and a few women even NURSE BABIES.

THE FRONT SEATS

Some slaves of the upper-class 'fans' smack long WOODEN HANDS² together overhead as their MASTERS recline in luxurious padded seats. Others - equally wealthy - leap up cheering and one even grabs the 'souvenir hands' away from his slave and whacks them together himself.

AND NARCISSUS...

Taking this all in, his eyes shift to:

THE IMPERIAL BOX

Empty... the relief marble Wolf of Rome glares in the burning sun.

INT. ARENA - ANOTHER DAY

Narcissus, armed with just his sword, faces a LAQUEARIUS, a 'lasso man'. Shirtless, but wearing leather fringed pants he whirls a rope overhead like Hopalong-fucking-Cassidy. Narcissus circles.

NARCISSUS

Surrender, or I'll kill you!

VOICE

Go ahead and kill him!

Laughter... but as Narcissus circles he stumbles.

PROXIMO

watches from the 'trenches'. He turns to Adonis.

PROXIMO

He's drunk... he's going to die
this time.

ARENA

The Laquearius almost magically spins his rope so the loop straightens and he snaps Narcissus cheek with it like a whip. The crowd loves it. Narcissus grabs his cheek, puzzled by what's happening.

For a second he seems to clear his head, but now the crowd is into the thrill of the hunt. When the Laquearius turns to raises his hands to the crowd Narcissus tries to close the distance - in a flash that whirling rope is back defining the limit of Narcissus' approach. Humiliated and just not thinking straight he makes a sudden rush - and Laquearius lassos him...

Narcissus tries to pull his arms loose but the Laquearius yanks the noose so tight Narcissus' arms are frozen with his sword against his body.

Now the Laquearius plays to the crowd - he yanks Narcissus to his knees and dances around him, winding himself closer as the rope twists around Narcissus. Then he kneels behind Narcissus, pulls his head back by his hair and puts the knife against his throat... he looks up to the crowd.

THE MOB...

Shouting, stamping, all plunging their thumbs down against their chests.

PROXIMO

turns away. He sits on Narcissus's rock beside Dala. He just can't watch.

LAQUEARIUS

smiles for the fans - but Narcissus sees that exposed wrist and sinks his teeth into the man's artery - Laquearius rips his arm loose and blood spews like a broken garden hose.

Laquearius grabs his wrist and drops his sword - Narcissus kicks him, flips him and pins him with his knees. He gets hold of the sword, jams the blade under the ropes and slices himself free. In a flash he turns the sword and drives it into the Laquearius' chest.

He stands, catches his breath - the crowd cheers. Narcissus turns face smeared with blood, watches them yell and gesture at him. He looks like an ANIMAL...

INT. 'TRENCHES'

The gladiators silently watch Narcissus as he comes in from the arena and crosses to a stone cistern to splash cold water on his face and hair. Proximo gingerly approaches. The CHEERS now include more calls for "Narcissus". Proximo snaps his fingers - a slave brings Narcissus wine.

PROXIMO

That was one of the most impressive feats I've ever seen. You hear them calling your name?

(Narcissus drinks)

You scorn them. But, they admire you. When Emperor Trajan had his victory over five thousand gladiators fought to the death - out there. So, they know a good fight. As a soldier you must have fought very well for Rome.

INT. GLADIATOR WAGON - LATE AFTERNOON

Silence, all the gladiators focused on Narcissus who couches in the corner, face on his folded arms as if he were asleep. As usual the kids chase the wagon, taunting. Suddenly Bad Teeth shoots his hand through the bars and snags the little Blond Kid by the throat. The kid gags, dragging as his friends try to pull him loose.

Bad Teeth just grins his grin and hangs on - strangling. Out of nowhere Narcissus grabs Bad Teeth's arm - they look each other in the eye and Bad Teeth drops the kid in the dirt.

BAD TEETH

Narcissus The Good!

INT. GLADIATOR AREA, THE 'TRENCHES'...

As Narcissus, Bad-Teeth, Vednas, Adonis, Crassus, Dala and others enter, Proximo follows in the wake of an Arena Slave who's handing out bread and wine. A few VOICES call Narcissus by name...

PROXIMO

You hear, General? Some people remember you. You're a surly bastard and still they like you.

an ARENA SLAVE hands Crassus a long spear and he enters the arena - CHEERS of the mob welcome him.

Crassus turns toward a horrendous clank of CHAINS: Two arena SLAVES race in opposite directions down a long hall yanking chains that lift a cage to ground level.

ARENA

Crassus faces a scenery facade that's shaped like a STONE CAVE. A TIGER rushes from the cave.

NARCISSUS

sits on a stone block beside the other gladiators.

DALA

Bad luck! A tiger. Someone important must be betting against Crassus...

A LIGHT FEMALE VOICE calls Narcissus' name. The sound is so strange that at first Narcissus doesn't respond. Then he sees the FOUR WHORES at a barred window. The Cute Whore wearing a wig with spring-like curled hair waves Narcissus over. Fascinated, he crosses to the bars.

CUTE WHORE

Narcissus The Good! Can you afford me today?

Narcissus turns away toward a SHOUT from the arena.

ARENA

Within twenty feet the tiger crouches to spring. Crassus SHAKES HIS LONG HAIR and the TINY BELLS FLASH AND TINKLE. Baffled by the glinting bells, the tiger stands out of his crouch.

NARCISSUS

turns back to the Whore. She smiles.

CUTE WHORE

Pay the guard something. They'll let me in and we can do it here.

Narcissus seems confused and maybe he would except:

NARCISSUS

I... have no money.

ANOTHER WHORE

She's in love with you! She'll do
you for free!

The Whores break into laughter. Then the Cute Whore gestures Narcissus to the bars like she wanted to whisper and when he gets close she kisses his cheek - they break off laughing again and suddenly GUARDS outside shoo them away... Proximo puts a hand on Narcissus' shoulder.

PROXIMO

The Emperor is here. He's come
here himself to distribute bread
to the people!

It takes Narcissus a second, then he slowly rises and looks through the bars.

EXT. IMPERIAL BOX

Six Praetorian Guard flank the Imperial seat. The crowd shouts as the tiger CHARGES - Crassus DROPS and the SUN CRASHES INTO THE TIGER'S EYES...

Crassus angles the spear to catch the blinded tiger straight in the chest. He flips the impaled cat onto its back and LEANS on the spear. The tiger tears out with a paw and SINKS ITS CLAWS INTO CRASSUS' SHOULDER, pulling him down.

DALA

Watch out for the back claws!

Crassus is pulled down as the tiger's thrashing rear legs tearing into Crassus' gut. Crassus falls on the cat with his huge hands around its throat. Face-to-face, their foreheads touching - the tiger, fangs bared, Crassus grimacing, - they die.

IN THE BEST SEATS

A bleak looking PROCONSUL hands a fistful of GOLD to a self-important MERCHANT who makes a big show of winning his bet.

ALL THE GLADIATORS

stand, watching. Bad Teeth is the first to sit. Proximo waves a pair of slaves out.

PROXIMO

Shit! Get his body! Damn! Damn
them all!

Then, with a RUMBLING FANFARE of DRUMS and staccato horns Commodus makes a grand entrance. Lucilla, Tribuus and Falco are at the forefront of an entourage which includes all manner of wealthy hangers-on.

JERSES (O.S.)

After an absence of nearly an entire generation...

JERSES

stands on Commodus' left side.

JERSES

... great Caesar, Emperor of all Rome has returned to our beloved Colosseum!

Commodus stands receiving the unbelievable howls and cheers of the crowd. Even he is amazed by the reception and stands grinning and waving. Commodus finally turns, nods to Jerses and sits. More drum and horn effects and then silence.

JERSES

In his boundless wisdom, and with the generosity of the gods, Caesar Marcus Aurelius Commodus Antoninus Augustus...

GLADIATORS

By now all watch the display. With every second Narcissus' interest grows. Crassus body is brought in and the others crowd around. Even Proximo steps up to put a hand on him.

JERSES (O.S.)

... in keeping his sworn trust to Rome's Citizens...

ARENA

Jerses reaching an apoplexy of passion.

JERSES

... will distribute as much grain or bread as each man, woman or child present here may carry!

The crowd goes wild. Commodus rises and the crowd begins a football-like chant of CAESAR-CAESAR-CAESAR... He holds up his arms welcoming the adulation. Commodus is almost physically effected by the cheers the power and psychological rush is so tremendous.

NARCISSUS...

turns away from the sight. Arena Slaves move through the ranks, two flank Narcissus and one hands him a sword. Proximo pats him on the shoulder and moves down the ranks.

PROXIMO

You're next. All of you, Caesar is here. Perform well and who knows?, someone might get the wooden sword!

BAD TEETH

At least you'll make some big bets on us with Caesar here.

Snorts of disdain from other gladiators.

IMPERIAL BOX

Falco leans over and plops down five gold coins.

FALCO

Caesar, let me sponsor your first wager in the arena.

COMMODUS

I wouldn't know who to bet on.

NARCISSUS (O.S.)

Great Caesar! We who are about to die, salute you!

The sound of Narcissus' voices hits Commodus like a blow. Stunned he and Falco rise and gawk down into the arena - Commodus locks eyes with Narcissus.

Narcissus stares at Commodus... then turns as the people cheer and give cat-calls. Narcissus faces a gladiator approaching from the opposite side. He's a THRACIAN GLADIATOR; he holds up his round shield and curved sword to the crowd.

COMMODUS -

just gawks at Narcissus.

COMMODUS

Why isn't he dead? Damn you, you promised me he would be dead!

TRIBUUS

Caesar, I did my best. The Colosseum isn't under my control...

Sudden panic from Jersees who realizes the ball's in his court.

JERSEES

Truthfully, Caesar, the crowd doesn't care for him. He wins, but...

COMMODOUS

Wins? What in hell are you talking about? That man is my enemy! Lucilla, you knew he was here! You did this to humiliate me!

LUCILLA

Don't be ridiculous. Come on; he's just a gladiator. Will you sit down? Everyone's watching.

NARCISSUS & SOME CROWD

Surrender, or I'll kill you!

This does not help Jersees' case..

LUCILLA

The crowd does seem to know him...

JERSEES

But just a handful in the cheap seats.

NARCISSUS

watches the Thracian very closely. Obviously the man is not going to surrender. They circle as the crowd shouts - the sound of the full fifty thousand people is deafening. For a second Narcissus stops paying attention, and he looks up toward the Imperial box. The Thracian charges and Narcissus just has time to block his sword and shove him aside.

Now Narcissus get furious and bangs away at the Thracian.

JERSEES

He's making a mistake. He'll lose now, he can't match the Thracian's strength. He's one of the best from School of Lykas.

COMMODOUS

And Narcissus..?

JERSES

School of Proximo! If anyone's responsible for his life it's Proximo, he saved him.

Just as those words leave Jerse's mouth Narcissus shoves his sword right through the Thracian's shield with a tremendous blow that kills him.

AND COMMODUS

He just turns away.

COMMODUS

As soon as he goes, distribute the grain. Jerse's?

JERSES

Yes. I can hold the rest of the fights until the food is given out, that's why everyone came anyway. Honestly, he's not really that popular, Caesar.

A MUG on Commodus table suddenly SHATTERS. He looks at it like "what the hell?" The crowd HOWLS

BELOW

Narcissus picks up ROCKS and throws them up at the imperial box. Adonis tries to drag him off as Dala clutches the swords.

The audience goes completely NUTS - some spectators in the cheap seats actually keel over from spasms of laughter.

Praetorian Guard immediately move in front of Commodus and the crowd BOOS them. At the same time more and more call Narcissus name. Dala and Adonis grab Narcissus and pull him off the sand as the crowd continues to go nuts.

COMMODUS

Kill him! Tribuus - execute that bastard.

LUCILLA

You can't do that! You came here to turn the crowd around not make them hate you.

Commodus stands and pushes aside the Praetorian Guard so the crowd can see him. He smiles, making the best of it. The Good Seats applaud his effort.

COMMODUS
Tribuus... tomorrow.

LUCILLA
You're coming back?

COMMODUS
I have to come back. If I don't
come back the people will think
I'm a coward. Tribuus, tomorrow
he dies - I want his blood on the
sand. Do you understand?

TRIBUUS
Yes, Caesar?

COMMODUS
Jerses - tomorrow...

THE TRENCHES

As the other gladiators hold Narcissus back - guy's
eyes are wild, months of hate crashing to the
surface. He pulls loose and sits.

JERSES (O.S.)
On this next day, Emperor Commodus
will give out double this same
amount of grain and loaves of
fresh bread from the Imperial
ovens!

COMMODUS STANDS

and the crowd goes wild... he smiles and nods
grimly. Looks like today he's had the last word.

INT. GLADIATOR WAGON - LATE AFTERNOON

Narcissus breathing hard as if he were still
resonating from a rush of renewal. Proximo sits
opposite with a guard, absolutely gleeful - wrapping
his hands together and all but muttering "O-boy, o-
boy, o-boy!"

PROXIMO
Throwing rocks at the Emperor! I
can't tell you how much I love
that! Oh, Gods, thank you!
(to Adonis)
When we get back - wine for our
hero. The best red from Moselle!
Not that piss from Crete! Wine
that's not the color of blood is
no wine!

Kids race alongside the wagon shouting his name - people they pass wave and shout for Narcissus. Now PEOPLE mob the wagon, and it slows. Narcissus still seems to be recovering, it's as if his mind were ascending from hell back to the daylight.

Proximo edges closer so no one else will hear.

PROXIMO

At the end of the day I was approached by the Golden Pompeii Olive Oil company. Small, but profitable. They asked if you would endorse their oil. We could get some very nice posters. Make some very big money...

NARCISSUS

What would the poster say:
"Narcissus would kill for a taste of Golden Pompeii Olive Oil?"

PROXIMO

Think about it! Just think about it!

DALA

Look at that! That's new!

Narcissus looks out through the bars as they pass a square and a large STATUE OF COMMODUS.

PROXIMO

The big push is on for the month of Janus approaches!

EXT. PROXIMO'S SCHOOL - NEAR DUSK

As Armed Slaves unload the gladiators, two separate Narcissus and bring him to Proximo.

PROXIMO

We're going some place tonight. Don't even think about trying to escape you'll be heavily guarded. We're going to a party where Adonis will beat the brains out of some fool. Your presence has been requested.

INT. DOMUS, PRIVATE GYMNASIUM - NIGHT

A palatial private residence in Rome. Judging from the heavily embroidered togas this is a high-end crowd: 'equites publicani'.

Narcissus sits on a chair, wrists cuffed, flanked by armed slaves, watching as Adonis squares off with a tall, lean EGYPTIAN. They both wear leather gloves studded with spikes. The Egyptian nails Adonis who totters bloody from the blow - and the CROWD moves in blocking the view.

A SERVANT sets three dishes on tripod stands for guests to wander past and help themselves.

The FIRST is a pile of FISH HEADS - remarkable for their ENORMOUS GAPING EYES. The SECOND is a spiral of multi-colored BIRD EGGS. A YOUNG MAN cracks an egg, holds it up and a whole BIRD EMBRYO drops into his mouth. He clamps down on it with a CRUNCH.

Narcissus sees TWO ATTRACTIVE GIRLS watching him from across the room. They whisper, giggle, and approach. Then they pause by the three dishes. The girls are suddenly right in front of Narcissus.

GIRL #1

You're Narcissus, aren't you? The gladiator? My sister has something she wants to give you...

Girl #2 kneels, parts his legs so she can get very close and opens her mouth. In the cup of her tongue is a huge FISH EYE. Apparently she wants him to suck it off. Narcissus might actually be tempted, but...

NARCISSUS

I've eaten, but thank you...

Girl #2 makes a show of swallowing the eye. She climbs off her knees, kisses Narcissus, then arm in arm she and her sister leave.

Narcissus' eyes are drawn to the third bowl and it seems to contain BRIGHTLY COLORED CHIPS. But they MOVE... they're LIVING BUTTERFLIES dusted with a sparkling colored coating of diluted honey. Helpless in the bowl, their wings fold and unfold.

Proximo arrives with six very wealthy-looking MEN in tow. While slaves bring up chairs Proximo casually scoops up a handful of butterflies and pops them into his mouth like Fritos.

Chairs are brought up for each and they all sit directly opposite Narcissus and study him as if he were some piece of art.

PROXIMO

Gentlemen, Narcissus The Good!

Hmmm... they continue to study him. Then a GREY
 HAired MAN sorts himself out of the guests and
 approaches. It's Gracchus.

GRACCHUS

Who are you? Narcissus The Good?
 I have heard of Narcissus Meridas.
 That's who I hear you are.

NARCISSUS

You're hearing about somebody
 else.

GRACCHUS

How did you get condemned to the
 arena without a trial?

NARCISSUS

When the Senate and the Emperor
 agree miracles can happen.

GRACCHUS

Would you support the Senate of
 they would give you a trial?
 You'd have to give me your word.

NARCISSUS

I need to give you my word when
 yours is worth nothing?

GRACCHUS

You're a citizen and a soldier.
 Not a gladiator.

NARCISSUS

You don't know how wrong you are.

INT. COLOSSEUM - NEXT DAY

Narcissus waits with the other gladiators. Proximo
 approaches Narcissus. An Arena Slave hands
 Narcissus a sword and shield.

PROXIMO

Jerses is pitting you against one
 of Lykas' Dimachaeri - Saturnus...

BAD TEETH

A two-sword; light armor, Saturnus
 is one of Lykas' best, very fast.
 The Emperor is behind this. First
 Crassus, now you're dead.

CENTER ARENA

As soon as Narcissus steps out the crowd goes w i.

Dozens of people call his name. Saturnus holds two swords, one short and the other long with an X-shaped head. For a moment the audience goes quiet as the two face off. Narcissus YELLS:

NARCISSUS

Surrender or I'll kill you!

The crowd loves it - some cheer. Saturnus flips his short sword into a stabbing position, holds out his long sword. Narcissus charges whaling at him with his shield.

Taken completely off-guard Saturnus dodges - and TRIPS. Narcissus is on him - crushing down on his head with his shield. Saturnus flails wildly - cuts Narcissus on the right with the long sword. Narcissus yanks the short sword out of the man's hand and kills him with it. The crowd GASPS.

Narcissus reels to his feet, drops his shield and grips his wound which spews blood. Then he sees 'PLUTO' approaching with his death hammer.

THE GLADIATORS

rush to the doorway, shout his name, urging him on.

NARCISSUS

Staggers, keeps moving as Pluto dogs his steps waiting for Narcissus to fall. He gets within twenty feet of the doorway... suddenly looks like he's going to fall - there's a GASP from the crowd.

AND COMMODUS --

On the edge of his seat.

NARCISSUS

Gives Pluto the hard stare... and DROPS - but all the Proximo gladiators rush out and he falls into Bad Teeth's arms. The crowd ROARS.

COMMODOUS

Give out the food - quickly!

INT. GLADIATOR WAGON - AFTERNOON

Narcissus barely wakes. Adonis works desperately to stop the wound as Proximo squats nearby crazy with anxiety. The GANG KIDS jog along side the wagon, deathly quiet as they watch. The Blonde Kid reaches in through the bars with a small mug of water.

BLOND KID

Don't die Narcissus! It's
Narcissus! Narcissus the Good!

Narcissus agonizingly reaches up and clasps it - for a second the boy holds on, then lets it go. Now the Cute Whore appears frantically blowing him kisses as if they could somehow save him. Now more and more hands reach in through the bars as citizens hear his name and crowd around.

PROXIMO

Don't die, general! One third!
One third! After today everyone
will know your name!

INT. SENATE - MORNING

Gracchus stands before the body of Senators.

GRACCHUS

No trial! No defense! Narcissus
Meridas, general of the VIIth Felix
Gemini legions! How could this
happen?

Senate breaks into muttering and some yell for Falco to speak - very reluctantly he does.

FALCO

I was one who agreed with the
Emperor to do this thing along
with Senator Gaius!

(shouts of outrage)

And with good reason: we were
trying to avoid civil war!

VOICE

But he deserved a full trial! Sit
down, Falco! Gaius! Gaius!

GAIUS

Narcissus Meridas deserves a full
trial! Yes! Let the Senate
become the champion of the people!

(Yes! Yes!)

And then let the Senate crush
their hopes, further humiliate
Narcissus by sending him back to
the arena, and let us by all means
make the Emperor look good while
we do it!

FALCO

The truth of it is that he defied
a direct order of his Emperor and
the acting Senate!

GRACCHUS

It was a disgraceful order!

More shouts as Senators stand at will.

GAIUS

Narcissus is guilty as charged and
this body would have to lie long
to find otherwise!

(Sit down you traitor!)

I will not sit down! I will not
sit down!

The Senate disintegrates into squabbling.

INT. NARCISSUS' CELL - NEAR DUSK

Narcissus slowly wakes. He sees Adonis and Dala.
Though Dala slumps in a corner, asleep, Adonis
carefully crushes garlic bulbs in a mortar.
Confused, his eyes stray around the room and fix on
a CRUDE POSTER OF HIMSELF holding up a sword nailed
to the wall.

Proximo enters, kicks Dala awake and kneels beside
Narcissus. He helps him sip water.

PROXIMO

General, hang on... drink slowly.
You are blessed by the Gods to
have a physician and a Divine of
Janus with you tonight. A fan
sent them to you.

NARCISSUS

Alive... I'm alive...

Narcissus seems disappointed, disoriented and at
first, possibly delirious. The Doctor kneels on his
right, the Divine on the left.

PROXIMO

Your fans have gathered below in a
vigil. Even the Senate, that
swamp of double-talking dung
beetles is discussing you.

The Doctor carefully works on his arm taking garlic
from Adonis and smearing it on the wound.

DIVINE

I'm here to guide you through the
gates of Janus, general.

NARCISSUS

My daughters, my wife. Are they there?

But the Divine shuts his eyes, muttering almost inaudibly. The Doctor works - as if it were a contest between the pair. The door opens and Vednas pokes his head in, gestures to Proximo who exits.

Narcissus looks up at the two windows and sees FACES peering in at him. They're the other GLADIATORS who live in Proximo's school. One is tying a charm of leopard claws to the bars.

Then the door opens and Lucilla is ushered in by an ultra fawning Proximo. Lucilla wears a veil which she lowers as she sits beside Narcissus.

LUCILLA

I knew they'd never kill you.

It takes Narcissus a second to focus and when he sees he grabs her by the throat with his good arm - Proximo and Adonis pry him loose... for a second Lucilla chokes.

LUCILLA

It's my brother's neck you want, not mine.

NARCISSUS

Yours will do!

Narcissus winces with pain from the effort and Lucilla leans beside him against the wall.

DOCTOR

General, you nearly opened your wound.

LUCILLA

Keep that up and you'll make everyone happy.

NARCISSUS

Proximo, if this is her doctor he's an assassin.

PROXIMO

Don't be ridiculous.

ADONIS

If you die, general, I'll kill them both for you.

The Doctor and the Divine look at Adonis, then to Lucilla for a clue.

LUCILLA

I came here to see that you stay alive. The people need a living breathing alternative to Commodus, a hero.

NARCISSUS

You mean a symbol of someone who doesn't exist.

LUCILLA

But you do exist. Narcissus: hero of the battle of the Danube.

Narcissus tries to laugh, but it just hurts.

LUCILLA

You've got the Senate scared they'll have to explain to the people how they joined the Emperor in illegally condemning you. And Commodus, he lies awake thinking how he could kill you, and finally rid himself of my father. You are the only man in Rome no one can touch. Live, Narcissus Meridas, the citizens of Rome protect you now.

The Doctor hands Lucilla a damp cloth and while he finishes bandaging the wound leaving a long lamp wick to help it drain, she gets closer and wipes his forehead. The longer she does it the more it becomes a caress.

NARCISSUS

Twenty years I've led men to die. For me it was the glory of Rome. But that was something. If it wasn't that, then it was the pay or the loot or the next whore - but that was something! These men here are butchered for laughs! Their lives are like jokes delivered in the back alley theatres where their death is a punch line!

LUCILLA

For the sake of the Gods, you're not leading these men? How like my father you are. You 'believe' ... I guess that's why you're still alive.

Narcissus grips the Divine by the sleeve.

NARCISSUS

When the door is open, I'll be
ready to pass through.

Lucilla looks over at Proximo, then the Doctor.
Proximo nods and backs out of the room.

DOCTOR

Jove's hands are on him now.

As Narcissus starts to fade again she gestures them
out and they dutifully follow Proximo.

NARCISSUS

To think I brought my daughters up
on all things Roman. Read to
sleep on Catullus, Lucretius...
Virgil... every night. My
beautiful daughters.

LUCILLA

Do you remember your Epictetus,
that little homily we recited when
we were children? The one that
was supposed to remind us we were
Romans?

She holds Narcissus' head, daubing away the
perspiration with the cloth.

LUCILLA

"If you consider yourself to be
only one thread of many in the
tunic, then it is fitting for you
to be like the rest of men, just
as the thread has no desire to be
any better than the other threads.
But... "

NARCISSUS

"But what if I wish to be purple?"

They smile recalling the old, childhood words.

NARCISSUS/LUCILLA

"A small part, which is bright,
and makes all the rest appear
graceful and beautiful.

LUCILLA

"Why then do you tell me to make
myself like the many?"

NARCISSUS

"For if I do, how shall I still be purple?"

Now they laugh, finding this connection. But Lucilla knows exactly where she's going.

LUCILLA

"Then when you ask me the question, whether death is preferable or life? I say "life."
"Pain or pleasure?" I say
"pleasure."

She kisses him and as best he responds. In the end the best both can do is get close on his blanket.

LUCILLA

You cannot die.

NARCISSUS

Would that Marcus had lived.

LUCILLA

Marcus would have lived but... was poisoned by his son.

NARCISSUS

He killed his father and then my family...

LUCILLA

Narcissus, I have your family. They're alive. All of them.

Narcissus forces himself to sit up - in fact he tries to stand but just can't.

NARCISSUS

Where are they?

LUCILLA

Hidden. Where my brother cannot place hands on them. He didn't have the guts to watch them die so... I took care of it all. The sooner he is put out of our misery, the sooner will they be safe.

EXT. PALATINE HILL, PALACE - NIGHT

Commodus looks out over Rome from the broad palace window. Lucilla enters, dismisses her slaves. Commodus is fixated on the only sound: voices of people WAITING.

COMMODUS

Where have you been?

LUCILLA

Taking my pleasure. Do I need to clear my lovers with you?

COMMODUS

You must start clearing everything with me - especially your lovers.

LUCILLA

Why are you so surly - you've won, brother. The people have bread and the city is quiet.

COMMODUS

What is that... wailing?

LUCILLA

The fans of Narcissus. They were on vigil outside the school of Proximo. They believe he's dying.

First time we've ever seen Commodus so pleased.

COMMODUS

Now that is a happy sound! Tomorrow, I want the citizens - my people - back in the arena. The Gods know, I'm tired. Come to bed, now; tonight we're celebrating.

LUCILLA

What are you talking about?

COMMODUS

Now that we're done with that infatuation forever.

LUCILLA

If I ever loved Narcissus it wasn't like you want.

COMMODUS

But I get what I want, always, don't I?

He presses her against the wall and she shoves him back sinking her nails into his face. But she pushes her down on her knees as he twists her head back by her hair.

COMMODUS

Thanks to you I've been studying up on all the great times of my predecessors in the Colosseum: Domitian had the daughters of conquered kings raped to death by Chimpanzees - Vespasian's unfaithful mistress pulled apart by elephants; like they, I can do anything so long as the citizens - that stinking mob - approves.

He yanks her to her feet - she struggles again but he slams her against the marble wall, laughing.

COMMODUS

Come now, surely I'm more handsome that a Rhinoceros or an elephant.

Dazed, Lucilla allows Commodus to walk her toward his bedroom. But he pauses by the window again to hear the cries. Then he yanks her toward the bedroom.

FADE TO:

INT. FARM HOUSE, COUNTRYSIDE - NIGHT

Manto and Themis lie on the rough floor by a blazing hearth as Selene reads from the *AENEID*.

SELENE

So clash their swords, and so their shields resound.
Jove sets the beam; in either scale he lays:
The champions' fate, and each exactly weighs.
On this side, life and lucky chance ascends;
Heavy with death, that other scale descends...

INT. COMMODUS BEDROOM - DAWN

ON A PAINTING of leopards being captured for the circus. It drifts like a dream over a bed where Commodus seems to float in silk and linen. Lucilla lies asleep, face down naked but partly buried in the silk. Distant CHEERS from far below jar him AWAKE. Then Lucilla slowly wakes...

EXT. SCHOOL OF PROXIMO - DAWN

On a terrace over-looking the streets Proximo and Cos flank and support Narciss.

Clearly still in intense pain, he's determined to let the people know he's alive. Proximo is a human grin.

Narcissus surveys these faces, POOR PEOPLE mainly, common WORKERS, probably UNEMPLOYED. Then he picks out the gang-kids... all look to him as a hero. Beside them the Cute Whore... wearing a purple wig. Narcissus raises his hand, waves and they break into cheering.

ON NARCISSUS

Feeling something overwhelming as the breeze blows up from the forum carrying the cheers of the crowd.

INT. GLADIATOR STORE HOUSE

as Proximo and Cos watch Narcissus prowls through heaps of armor looking for just the right 'effect'. He sets a gaudy silver inlaid bronze helmet aside.

PROXIMO

It will be good luck for you to wear that helmet. It belonged to Cimon of Smyrna... he was crushed by an elephant.

NARCISSUS

Lucky it didn't step on his head.

Proximo and Cos swap looks. Narcissus comes up with a battered but wildly designed lorica segmentata studded with cheap gems and a SMILING SUN FACE of brass... he sets it aside. Then from the junk and comes up with a PLUME...

COS

So tell me, what happened between you and the emperor? What really happened on the German front? You know the Senate's arguing your case...

NARCISSUS

That's their job, isn't it? To argue. So, I think my case will be long on talk and short on action.

COS

I am prepared to write anything you tell me.

Narcissus goes back to sorting armor.

NARCISSUS

My birth sign is Water Bearer,
twenty-fifth day in the month of
Janus.

COS

The exact month when the Emperor
must be confirmed!

Narcissus allows himself a smirk; he knows what Cos
really wants to hear. Cos writes fast. Proximo
looks from one to the other a little confused.

NARCISSUS

The Emperor and I are bound by the
threads of The Fates. He was born
on August thirty-first, you know.

COS

That makes his birth sign...
Virgo! Why that's the sign of a
little girl! Can you tell my
readers more about your star-
crossed connection with Emperor
Commodus?

NARCISSUS

Proximo, we need to talk about my
one third... I imagine the betting
booths will be doing good
business. And, what was the name
of that olive oil company?

PROXIMO

Yes, of course, we'll go over
everything - but Cos has a
wonderful surprise! This is all
over the city!

Cos unrolls a copy of the *Daily Action* and proudly
reads his own words.

COS (READING OVER)

"Like Orpheus who ascends from
death's clutches, Narcissus the
Good has thrown back hell's gate!"

INT. PALACE, PALATINE HILL - MORNING

Commodus glares at a poster of Narcissus on the
table as Lucilla reads from the *Daily Action*. She
takes enormous pleasure in this.

LUCILLA

"... encased in the armor of a demigod, Narcissus the Good continues his impossible climb in the arena where he was unjustly cast..."

COMMODUS

Yes? Go on!

LUCILLA

"... by the emperor of Rome..

(pause)

This writer asks: between a Senate that debates truth until they choke, an Emperor who has the birth sign of a woman, is it possible there is more virtue within the arena than without?"

Commodus looks like his head is going to explode...
SHOUTING VOICES RISE OVER...

EXT. COLOSSEUM ARENA - MORNING

Narcissus messages his arm parading with the gladiators in his gaudy armor shiny as the massive chrome bumpers of a '59 Caddy, his wild plumed helmet under his arm. People shout 'Narcissus!', and 'General!' He raises his arms overhead like a super-hero - accepting, encouraging and getting the wild adulation of the crowd.

Narcissus breaks away from the line of gladiator - blowing kisses to the girls, absurdly striking muscle-man poses - and the crowd goes completely berserk - Narcissus is their man and they chant his name over and over.

'TRENCHES'

As Narcissus comes in from the arena Proximo gleefully hands him a fresh poster.

PROXIMO

No more bad luck now! The people are anticipating you! I have posters up over half the city advertising you as the great warrior - the true Roman! The man who fought side by side with the wolf of Rome!

NARCISSUS

Make us rich, Proximo, make us very rich...

INT. COLOSSEUM HALL

Colosseum Slaves shove Narcissus and the other gladiators against the walls as the double doors leading to the street swing wide and a CHARIOT drawn by two WHITE HORSES THUNDERS DOWN THE HALL.

DALA

It's Tiger! 'Tiger of Death!'

THE ARENA

The TIGER OF DEATH charges into the arena. At his side is Commodus, hair and beard GLINTING WITH GOLD - he wears a lion-skin gladiator costume. Tiger races his chariot once around the arena and reins to a halt brutally forcing the horses to 'skid' on their hind legs rodeo-style.

Cos joins them, reads from the scroll handed him by the Praetorian Guard.

COS

"Caesar Commodus discovering his lineage converges with the Demigod, Hercules, has determined to display his magnificence before his beloved citizens." The Emperor's going to fight in the arena. I'm supposed to write this for tomorrow's edition.

PROXIMO

Commodus... he's a gladiator... is he mad?

To an eerie silence Commodus is escorted into the imperial box by Guards. All eyes are on him in his invisible passage inside the Colosseum - catching up with him as he emerges into the imperial box. Still that silence.

Realizing the crowd is confused Commodus gestures toward Tiger who immediately struts for the fans who now see reason to CHEER.

Dressed in gold and silver inlaid gladiator armor, Tiger is fifty, but the guy looks terrific - got muscles on muscles. Maybe bald, he wears a gaudy flowing RED WIG. His chariot is a tight-framed sport model, tough and cutting-edge.

DALA

This is the man! Tiger is the only living gladiator ever to win the Wooden Sword!

NARCISSUS

What's the wooden sword?

PROXIMO

A symbol of something no one ever gets to keep the gladiators fighting hoping they'll get it anyway. Freedom, is the wooden sword. If you perform extraordinary feats, the Emperor can award you the wooden sword... and you're free.

ARENA

Tiger of Death waves the audience to silence. Then he turns and bows deeply to Commodus.

TIGER OF DEATH

My people! I have returned!

(deafening cheers)

How I have missed my glory days in this arena! And this is truly the most glorious day in the history of the Colosseum - in the splendid history of Rome! Caesar is to enter the arena as a gladiator! At long last an Emperor with enough guts to be one of us! Upon receiving this news I raced here in my new chariot straight from Ostia - nonstop! It took me only four hours and these new wood and leather wheel springs designed by my personal craftsmen smoothed out all the ruts!

A gush of 'OOOs' from the crowd. As Tiger shamelessly flogs his vehicle the retainer slowly walks it around the perimeter of the Colosseum.³

ADONIS

Caesar must have promised Tiger if he helped him he could flog his crappy chariots in the Colosseum.

NARCISSUS

watches as the crowd reacts to the fabulous absolutely-out-of-reach sport chariot. Some GASP. A WOMAN covers her mouth and sobs...

TIGER OF DEATH

The rails are crafted of the finest black Akee from Africa.

(MORE)

TIGER OF DEATH (CONT'D)

The passenger shell rendered light
by alternating the orange Cedar of
The Lebanon with through-cut cream
Manna Ash from Gaul - The entirety
of this sublime structure is
secured with Abyssinian Gilead
Resins and cold forged brazen
pegs!

A portly rich MAN in a toga the size of a tent - and
who couldn't fit in the chariot if you used a
twelve-foot shoehorn - gestures to Tiger.

TOGA TENT

Tiger! Is it possible for mortals
to acquire such a vehicle?

TIGER OF DEATH

Mortals - never! For like
Phaethon, son of Helios, who could
not control his father's sun-
chariot, the unskilled would
certainly crash!
But as I see you are a friend of
Caesar you must be no mortal! I
will take your order.

GLADIATOR AREA

Proximo puts his hand on Narcissus' shoulder.

PROXIMO

Tiger's challenged you and Jerses
has made me an offer, made us both
an offer: you take the fall.

NARCISSUS

What the hell are you talking
about, Greek?

Proximo gestures to Adonis who folds aside a cloth
revealing a brown leather BLADDER.

PROXIMO

You put this inside your shirt -
when Tiger stabs your stomach -
it's full of pig's blood. Gushes
out everywhere! It's really
impressive. Fantastic! Better
than the real thing!

NARCISSUS

So I pretend I'm dead. You get
gold, what do I get?

PROXIMO

You get to come alive again in the country!

NARCISSUS

As, what?, 'The Galloping Gladiator!'

PROXIMO

The point is you get to fight the easy country circuit, the small arenas, relax, live the good life!

NARCISSUS

Spend my days beheading country bumpkins? I don't know, Proximo, who has better wine than you? Besides, I'm beginning to think of the Colosseum as my home.

PROXIMO

But - you have to go out there! I'll give you more than your one third! When I get paid... just take the fall! You're too hurt to fight and the man's a killer!

NARCISSUS

Pressures on, eh Proximo? There's got to be a load of money in this. Why else would you toss a red hot commodity like me out the window?

PROXIMO

It's absolutely not like that! This is for your own good! Come on get the rest of your armor on!

But Adonis approaches holding Narcissus's shield.

ADONIS

General? Do you want me to strap on a shield? You can't hold it.

In reply Narcissus lifts his injured arm as much as he can and Adonis works to attach the shield. Then he checks with Narcissus - who seems noncommittal - and stuffs the bladder under his shirt. Outside the CHANTING rises.

NARCISSUS

Tell me honestly, since this may be our last earthly meeting: if this were a fair fight where would you put your money?

Proximo holds his chin up.

PROXIMO

On you! Of course! You are my
bravest fighter - the best fighter
I have ever seen!

NARCISSUS

Such nobility from such an ignoble
mouth. Take my advice and make
that bet.

PROXIMO

Oh, shit. Take your time! Don't
get suckered! This man is a
murderer! In his career he's
killed over a thousand gladiators.
Please, just take the fall!

ARENA

Narcissus steps into the blistering sun. The crowd
in the cheap seats is on its feet applauding.

COMMODUS

sits in his box watching grim-faced. To his right
sits Lucilla. Falco sits near the emperor.

TRIBUUS

He's going to take the fall. It's
all set. He must, he was almost
killed yesterday. He has no
choice. By morning he'll be gone.

ARENA

As soon as Narcissus steps forward Tiger swirls
around to face him, beckons dramatically.

TIGER OF DEATH

Come my sweet! The sacred sands
of the arena lust for another
life! Satisfy her hungering!

Then the cheap seats chant as one:

CROWD

Surrender or I'll kill you!

Tiger looks around, stunned. Narcissus yanks the
bladder out of his shirt - holds it up for all to
see and stabs it gushing blood onto the sand.

GASPS from the crowd and Tiger realizes he's in deep
guano.

The crowd works itself up again - the noise they make is that accelerating-train sound of a British Football Mob.

COMMODUS...

Furious but trying to stay calm. Lucilla can't hide a smirk of perverse pleasure.

LUCILLA

Looks like old Tiger is going to have a good old fashion fight on his hands.

ARENA

Tiger charges Narcissus. The crowd shouts as their swords cross and the battle is on. The two RAGE AT EACH OTHER.

COMMODUS

... motions to Tribuus.

COMMODUS

Tell Lykas to send a retiarius and a Samnite to help Tiger.

LUCILLA

You can't do that... listen to the mood of the crowd.

COMMODUS

I want that bastard dead!

LUCILLA

You want control of the crowd - you can't get it by killing their hero.

COMMODUS

I am their hero!

LUCILLA

Not yet, dear brother...

COMMODUS

Send them out!

THE ARENA...

Narcissus **HAMMERS** at Tiger as if he were trying to chop down a huge tree - every blow rattles the old pro. With each blow the crowd in the cheap seats echoes with "Yes! - Yes! - Yes!"

Then a RETIARIUS and a SAMNITE - a lightly armed Italian (non-Latin) warrior with a jag-edge sword - enter and move in on Narcissus. The crowd erupts in thunderous BOOING hurling Commodus food back into the arena. Just as suddenly Bad Teeth and Vednas shove into the arena to flank Narcissus - but they're unarmed.

PROXIMO

kicks a Slave - yells out at them.

PROXIMO

Jack asses! You'll all die! Get back in here!

The crowd chants: "ARM THEM - ARM THEM!" That's good enough for Proximo - he kicks the slave again.

ARENA

Two Arena Slaves dart out, hand Bad Teeth and Vednas swords, run off and the crowd CHEERS. For a second Narcissus spots Dala near the gate.

COMMODOUS

watches the fight but Lucilla studies Commodus. Clearly Narcissus is driving him mad.

ARENA

The battle now shapes up even, Bad Teeth driving the Samnite back, Vednas and retiarius circling. Narcissus and Tiger LOCK ARMS - swords frozen overhead, they try to power the other down and it becomes a test of strength. Narcissus starts to cave from the pain to his wound.

COMMODOUS

Stands - this could be it... EVERYONE STANDS...

ARENA

But Narcissus digs deep, grits his teeth and Tiger STAGGERS and FALLS, losing his sword. Instantly he's on his feet and running like a scared rabbit as a slave rolls out his chariot. Tiger leaps into his hot-rod, hefts a thrusting spear and makes straight for Narcissus.

There's a universal howl of rage from the mob as they fill the air with pieces of food, sandals - whatever is loose. At that moment the Lykas retiarius overwhelms Vednas.

Narcissus dodges Tiger's first charge and as the chariot swings back into position he surprises the retiarius by yanking his net backwards toppling the retiarius and freeing Vednas.

PROXIMO

turns to Dala who's strapping his wrists.

PROXIMO

He can't do that! And what the hell are you doing?

DALA

Waiting for the general's orders.

ARENA

Bad Teeth and Vednas drive their opponents back: But then Narcissus motions Vednas and Bad Teeth back as Tiger lines up for another run on Narcissus. Absolutely trusting him - like their general in battle - Vednas and Bad Teeth move toward Narcissus just as Tiger charges - and Narcissus WAVES AT DALA.

NARCISSUS

Cavalry! Attack!

Dala comes HOWLING into the arena on his ostrich buck naked, spinning his red toga overhead. Tiger's horses take one look at this yowling apparition and FREAK - one goes left, the other leaps UP - Tiger's chariot CRASHES hurling him onto the sand. The crowd CHEERS in one mad voice.

This love raining on him, Narcissus motions Bad Teeth and Vednas back as he stands over the fallen Tiger. Defeated and suddenly pitiful, he holds up his trembling forefinger in the sign for mercy. But the crowd shouts, stamps their feet and universally give the "thumbs down."

Narcissus looks around at the howling crowd, but does nothing and finally they quiet because they can't figure out why he hasn't killed him.

NARCISSUS

He's surrendered! I can't kill him!

For a second the crowd is dumbfounded. People look at each other as if to say "so what?" Then they start laughing.

VOICES

This isn't the army! Kill him!
Kill him!

Narcissus turns his sword around OFFERING THE GRIP
TO THE AUDIENCE.

NARCISSUS

Who will do it?

They fall silent again. Then Narcissus laughs and
HURLS his sword up into the audience.

LOWER SEATS

People duck as the sword clatters on the marble
seats. A second - then like a souvenir home-run
ball everyone seems to leap for it at once. Then
EVERYONE LAUGHS as Narcissus struts back across the
arena, really PLAYING THE CROWD.

COMMODUS...

slowly closes his eyes as if forcing back his rage.

AND PROXIMO

all but doing a jig.

PROXIMO

This man! My god! He can't do
anything wrong! No matter how
stupid he is!

INT./EXT. ROYAL CHAIR - LATE AFTERNOON

Surrounded as usual by Praetorian Guard, Commodus
and Lucilla are carried in the enormous 'chair' by
slaves through Rome. Commodus looks int eh dumps,
but then leans out.

COMMODUS

Tribuus! Go left here, I want to
see my new statue at Via Claudia.

TRIBUUS

Yes, Caesar.

COMMODUS

We need more statues - perhaps I
should opening medical clinics.
For the poor. Citizens only,
though...

COMMODUS' POV

In the center of the bustling square is a magnificent STATUE OF COMMODUS holding up a sword.

But towering over the statue is an ENORMOUS MOSAIC BILLBOARD OF NARCISSUS HOLDING UP A BOTTLE OF OLIVE OIL. And it's done as an EXACT IMITATION OF THE POSTURING OF THE COMMODUS STATUE HOLDING HIS SWORD. Beneath, in GILT MOSAIC LETTERS: "NARCISSUS DRINKS ONLY GOLDEN POMPEII OLIVE OIL!"

AND COMMODUS...

literally getting the picture.

INT. COLOSSEUM, GLADIATOR AREA - LATE AFTERNOON

Arena Slaves basically packing it in for the day. Proximo slings an arm over Narcissus.

PROXIMO

Listen, there's some people who want to talk to you.

He indicates A WOMAN, about forty and her son about twenty. They look prosperous.

NARCISSUS

How much money is involved?

PROXIMO

A great deal. They designed and build Tiger's chariot...

NARCISSUS

They want to dump tiger and have me endorse their damned chariot, right? They don't waste time...

PROXIMO

I can really rape them on this! Can I at least tell them you'll think about it?

NARCISSUS

No. Tell them I'll do it. But I want more posters all over Rome.

PROXIMO

Fantastic! Wonderful! But posters are very expensive.

NARCISSUS

Then get a large cash advance.

PROXIMO

Right, right... But they'll have to bring in a lawyer. I don't want to get sued over this.

NARCISSUS

Before they leave, get gold.

PROXIMO

Right, right, what am I thinking of?

NARCISSUS

I want another interview with Cos. Tell him to bring plenty of ink.

PROXIMO

I'll do it! Sure as there's shit in the Tiber we're all going to die, but for you - anything!

TRIBUUS

Proximo Palindromos?

PROXIMO

Ah! Already we're dead!

NARCISSUS

What do you want, mighty Tribuus?

TRIBUUS

Caesar wants to talk. I've come to guarantee Narcissus safety.

PROXIMO

You've come to send us to hell!

As they talk other gladiators close around Tribuus.

DALA

Our general stays with us.

Tribuus puts hand on his sword.

TRIBUUS

Keep away from me, animal!

Vednas and Dala move closer. Narcissus steps in between and grabs Tribuus' sword arm.

NARCISSUS

Tell your master I'll meet here, on the sand. After the Colosseum closes.

Tribuus pulls lose, turns - and runs smack into P.: Teeth - who SMILES. He shoves past.

INT. COLOSSEUM - MORNING

Narcissus sits face-to-face with Commodus across a tiny table. They have wine and bread. Just behind Commodus is Tribuus with the Praetorian Guard. Narcissus is flanked by Proximo and his gladiators.

COMMODUS

Endorse me in public. Do that and I'll make you rich and set you free. I'll return your estates. I know you would give anything to be outside again. Endorse me and you will be free. Think of it. What would you do with your freedom?

NARCISSUS

If you set me free I will find my way back to the army, march on Rome and depose you. Then, the army and I will restore the Republic so that animals like you will never control human destinies again.

Outraged, Tribuus makes a move toward Narcissus - immediately the gladiators pull their swords. For a second it looks like there's going to be blood shed... Commodus leans on the table between them and holds up his fist for emphasis.

COMMODUS

Is that how you want to spend your life? You're trapped in the Colosseum!

Narcissus GRABS his fist, locks it in his grip.

NARCISSUS

So are you...

Bad Teeth smiles at Tribuus again. Commodus pulls his hand free...

EXT. PALACE, PALATINE HILL - LATE AFTERNOON

In a small, circular marble space outside the gardens, Commodus oiled and stripped to leather shorts wrestles a really tough-looking SLAVE. Commodus EASILY dominates the match, clearly becoming a DRIVEN MAN. Lucilla leads Tribuus with Jerses and Lykas in tow.

LYKAS

Caesar, I am here...

Commodus doesn't even break stride.

COMMODUS

Lykas, pick a man. Someone who will look good. Jerjes I want it built up in the *Daily Action*...

LUCILLA

Do you want posters, too?

Commodus gives her an evil glare.

INT. PROXIMO'S INSULA - EARLY EVENING

Narcissus faces-off with Cos and Proximo across a table laden with food and wine.

NARCISSUS

"Bread and circuses", that's all the great poet said we Romans need.

Narcissus sees that glazed look in Cos' eyes. Narcissus pours them both wine.

NARCISSUS

It's time for you to tell the Citizens that Commodus stole the money allocated for defending the German border. It's time to tell the citizens everything. Will you write it?

COS

Yes, because I know they'll read it.

PROXIMO

Cos, what in Hades is the emperor up to? And don't tell me you don't know!

COS

I don't know...

PROXIMO

AGH! Please! He's having a secret device constructed for the circus. The brass craftsmen are working overtime.

COS

I'll nose around...

PROXIMO

You know there were riots last night.

(MORE)

PROXIMO (CONT'D)

Now the unrest has started again and Commodus has sent for an army division. You understand what you are doing...

EXT. COLOSSEUM ARENA - DAY

Commodus - hair sparkling with gold dust, wearing the Hercules lion skin - struts into the arena at the head of the gladiator parade. This time the audience applauds.

Narcissus enters with the Proximo gladiators behind the emperor and the volume of the cheers DOUBLES. Forcing himself not to turn, Commodus ascends to the imperial box. Before he sits, two SLAVES carry what looks like a folding campstool with curved legs. Cheers as Commodus sits in it.

EXT. COLOSSEUM

Narcissus slowly puts on his garish armor as Dala sits beside him.

DALA

What's that stupid stool?

NARCISSUS

It's the curule chair.

DALA

What in Hades is the curule chair?

PROXIMO

Rome's most ancient symbol of leadership. While all other kings sat in great stone thrones, Rome's leaders were always on the move with the army. Some of her greatest emperors barely had time to set foot in Rome. So this cheap little folding stool became a powerful symbol.

All eyes on Proximo now, Narcissus must be touched to hear these words from "such an ignoble mouth." Proximo shrugs it off, turns to Narcissus.

PROXIMO

So, things change. The government has moved to the circus. You're going to fight last. And Commodus is going to fight first.

NARCISSUS

You were a soldier, and then a gladiator, weren't you?

PROXIMO

Was I?

They hold on each other - then the crowd HOWLS.

DALA

Here he comes...

ARENA

Commodus struts onto the sand, muscular body oiled, golden hair glinting in the sun. A SLAVE trails behind, then gets on his knees and offers Commodus a vicious looking sword. Commodus holds up the sword CHEERS raining on him, the crowd going more and more with Commodus.

PROXIMO

joins his gladiators watching the spectacle.

COMMODUS

faces off with a heavily built PERSIAN and immediately attacks. The Persian hesitates, but then when he sees Commodus is serious he fights back. They swap blow upon blow and finally Commodus expertly topples the man with a swipe of his shield. Silence of disbelief from the audience - then they break into prolonged cheering.

Commodus raises his sword, accepting the acclaim. Then he KILLS the Persian. And the crowd loves it.

NARCISSUS

turns away, watches as Commodus joins the Lykas gladiators in their own 'holding' area on the opposite side of the arena.

PROXIMO

Why don't you let me assemble a sort of... how shall I put this?, 'Package' of enterprises which you could endorse while leaving all the messy business to me? I don't want to over-state the possibilities, but I've been approached by cheese-makers; a sandal manufacturer; at least four wineries; gymnasium machines...

Narcissus seems to measure the distance to his rival then looks into a dark passage behind with the door left ajar.

NARCISSUS

I'm going to leave this all up to
you, Proximo. I trust you.

(off his look)

Just be prepared to do me a few
favors in return.

NARCISSUS...

Moves toward the butcher shop, but sees armed slaves
at the doors of the passages beyond. Still he
reaches in between two hanging racks of ribs for a
flat cleaver... but his hand freezes.

On ice, in a mangled disorder is long hair bearing
BELLS. It's the dismembered corpse of Crassus.

A sweating FAT MAN in a loin cloth sings as he hacks
gladiator bodies to bits. He pauses, then crosses
to the lip of a sunken CAGE where two lionesses
pace. He heaves in two HUMAN LEGS, then wanders
back as slaves unwrap two more bodies.

QUINTUS (O.S.)

You'd never make it.

Narcissus wheels to confront two Praetorian Guard...
and Quintus.

NARCISSUS

You brought the army into Rome.

QUINTUS

I was summoned.

NARCISSUS

It's your job as a Roman officer
to disobey such a summons.

QUINTUS

It's my job to keep my job. And
that, by the way, is now head of
the Praetorian Guard. Good ole
Tribuus has been retired.

NARCISSUS

Quintus, you've got at least a
division with you - we could take
Rome away from Commodus and give
it back to the Senate!

QUINTUS

You seem to be doing a great job
of it single-handed! Narcissus,
the Republic is dead. You think
those Senators could govern?

(MORE)

QUINTUS (CONT'D)

For the last hundred and fifty years they've worked hard at kissing an endless succession of Imperial asses!

NARCISSUS

Then give the empire back to the people... the children who will grow up to become senators...

QUINTUS

The 'people'?, listen to the people, they know what they want: A government that gives them what they need and doesn't bother them with messy thoughts of elections and messy thoughts of issues. You know, messy... thinking. They want a dictator! As far as the children, there is only one thing that every Roman child dreams of: being you! A famous gladiator!

Quintus gestures to the guards.

QUINTUS

We'll escort you back to your new pals. Oh, and let's catch the next act, guaranteed to bring the house down. Everyone will be holding their breath to see what you come up with in return...

COLOSSEUM MAIN GATE

As Narcissus turns away, Proximo pulls him aside. Adonis joins them.

JERSES RISES

As drums roll ROME PROSTITUTES are pushed out into a far end of the arena by armed arena slaves.

JERSES

In celebration the emperor Commodus' triumph in the arena and the God's recognition of his divine lineage, these prisoners shall be - in his glorious generosity - freed! Or, Rome shall be freed of this pestilence forever!

A DOOR SPRINGS OPEN --

Out roar a BULL and a BEAR chained together...

They're berserk crashing into each other. The chain is fastened by a LARGE BRASS LOCK. An Arena Slave shoves a Dark-Haired Prostitute into the arena and hands her a bright metal KEY.

JERSES

Prisoner number one!

Commodus stands in his seat and the audience roars its approval - this is going to be good!

BAD TEETH

That pig!

JERSES

Part these raging beasts so that as Titans of old they may retire to their abodes! Do so and you part the path to your own freedom! An arena attendant waits on you at the far end of the Colosseum...

Sure enough, an Arena Slave opens a small door. The Dark-Haired Prostitute moves forward toward the animals...

AND NARCISSUS --

Simply cannot believe what he's seeing.

NARCISSUS

Gods - no!

THE PROSTITUTE

runs toward the shrieking beasts - she lunges for the lock - with a vicious snap of his neck the bull impales her on his right horn and flings the girl over his shoulder. The body lands like a twisted doll, bloody in the perfect sand.

JERSES

Prisoner #2!

Prostitute #2 is handed another key and the Arena Slave once again opens the far door.

PROXIMO

Commodus is a mad man, at home in a mad world.

JERSES

Separate these beasts and be separated from us!

Prostitute #2 takes one look at the situation and turns to bolt back inside.

QUINTUS

Now, there's a wise woman. Some people recognize reality when they see it. How's your eye sight these days? Well, look at this: we have a fresh offer for you from the Emperor. Forget being his supporter, fight in the arena side by side. Imagine, the two greatest gladiators on earth, shoulder-to-shoulder against all comers! It will remind everyone of your glory days fighting alongside Marcus Aurelius! And you'll be free and rich!

Narcissus sends a fleeting glance toward the ARENA as Prostitute #2 claws at the marble walls.

COMMODUS

Now, now! Would you leave us in the midst of our entertainment!?

CRAZED laughter and cheers from the mob. Arena Slaves appear with torches and whips beat Prostitute #2 until finally she rushes toward the animals, screaming...

Narcissus -- turns away as the ROAR OF THE CROWD signals another death in the arena. Now The Cute Whore is pushed into the arena and handed a key. Narcissus charges the opening but is violently shoved back by Arena Slaves.

QUINTUS

What are you fighting for in here? The good of Rome? I can end this madness now! Take the job for the sake of the Gods, live!

NARCISSUS

Can you stop that slaughter!? Can you free these men?

Quintus shakes his head in frustration. In the ARENA the Cute Whore drops the key and as the audience ROARS she walks to her death.

QUINTUS

turns to leave and Narcissus goes for him and is thrown to the ground by four huge Praetorian Guard. Vednas, Dala and Bad Teeth leap in between them and a sword that was homing in on Narcissus stops at the last second. Quintus clears out and his men follow. Proximo lumps down beside Narcissus.

PROXIMO

Jerses has you fighting a
retiarius from the school of
Lykas.

VEDNAS

The net man!

NARCISSUS ENTERS THE ARENA

and the crowd begins its "surrender or die" chant
for Narcissus and the retiarius HURLS HIS NET - but
timing his charge Narcissus dashes beneath the net
before it even settles behind him he's knocked aside
the retiarius trident and killed him. It happens so
fast the audience GASPS before CHEERING.

Narcissus rises, then bathed in cheers he holds his
arms straight in the air and points his sword at
Commodus.

NARCISSUS

I want you! I challenge you!
Come down here and fight me!

(to the cheap seats)

You may battle for the knights and
equates and Senators - but I
challenge you in the name of the
ordinary citizen of Rome!

For a moment there's dead silence - and for a moment
Narcissus must wonder if he's gone too far. Then
the mob EXPLODES to new heights of rapture.
Laughing, Narcissus holds his arms up to the crowd
as if to say: "Anytime, any place..." Then to roars
he struts out of the arena.

IMPERIAL BOX - NEAR DUSK

Commodus slumped in the curule chair. Quintus,
Lucilla and Falco are with him.

COMMODUS

This is the only place in Rome
where I thought - I believed - I
was wholly in power.

QUINTUS

Narcissus will never support you,
Caesar, he has too much of a
philosophical temperament.

Commodus gets up, scowls at Falco and paces.

COMMODUS

Damn him! I should have killed him on the front - I let you talk me out of that.

LUCILLA

You would have had a full scale revolt on your hands.

COMMODUS

What have I got now? It's exactly as if there were two emperors. Because of this the people have two minds. He is their champion.

QUINTUS

It's because he comes off as the underdog.

COMMODUS

Underdog! How can he be an underdog - he wins all the time! I'm the emperor why can't I kill him? He could be poisoned, or somehow killed to look like an accident.

QUINTUS

You don't want to kill him. If anything happens to him now you will be blamed... and he knows it. Besides, that gladiator school is a fortress. It would take the army to break in there. What you want is to... offer him the wooden sword. If he takes it, he's no longer the champion of the people, is he? He's gone. And you are a hero for awarding it.

LUCILLA

He wouldn't take the wooden sword, not in a thousand years.

QUINTUS

You're so sure, aren't you? If I were you I'd gleefully accept his challenge. Despite those who would thwart you, my agents have been busy.

Commodus looks from Quintus to Falco and Lucilla; understands he means THEM.

INT. COLOSSEUM - MORNING

Narcissus sits with his group of gladiators watching Arena Slaves assemble on the floor of the Colosseum with their sand 'grooming' tools.

Four huge crates are eased onto the field on wood rollers. The sides are cracked open and bright white SAND spills out. SOUND OF THE CROWD SEEMS TO RISE FROM THE EMPTY SEATS --

MATCH CUT TO:

PACKED SEATS

The mob well into a day's action. Dala, mounted on an ostrich, darts around the arena as he battles A GIANT OF A MAN who must be seven feet tall.

NARCISSUS

armored-up, checking his sword. Proximo arrives.

PROXIMO

Something strange; I still haven't got your fight for the day.

Dala makes a final charge against the 'Giant' and as he raises his ax and he catches him in the stomach with his sword. The crowd thinks it's the funniest thing on earth.

Then two GLADIATORS approach from a side door and position themselves near Narcissus' entrance.

JERSES

Narcissus Meridas! Come forward!

PROXIMO

It's a damned fix! They're going to murder you - I can't watch!

He GAWKS...

THE ARENA

Narcissus steps into the blistering sun and is stunned to see Commodus approach him, dressed in his lion's skin and carrying a long, shiny sword. He looks up at the Royal Box..

ROYAL BOX

Lucilla and Falco sit flanked by Praetorian Guards. Quintus enters with SELF AND HER DAUGHTERS, puts a hand on each little girl's shoulder.

Narcissus looks as though he's physically struck. Selene stares down at him, fighting back tears: Themis weeps openly while Manto remains stoic. He lowers his sword... Commodus gets near.

COMMODUS

Narcissus Meridas! I accept your challenge in the name of the Citizens of Rome!

The audience goes crazy - Commodus slashes out with his sword and Narcissus instantly parries the blow. For a moment Narcissus really turns it on and Commodus back-pedals... and slowly he lets Commodus get the better of him until Commodus knock the sword from his hand. Humiliated, Narcissus drops to his knees and holds up his hand for mercy.

But Commodus is so enrage that he lifts his sword to kill him but... has just enough presence of mind to look up into the crowd.

THE PEOPLE

shocked... then it spreads from the cheap seats through the whole arena THUMBS UP! They chant for Narcissus to be spared.

AND COMMODUS...

The last circuit breaker of self-preservation in his brain kicks in and he RAISES HIS ARMS IN TRIUMPH. He walks around the arena receiving their cheers - finally he feels like Emperor of Rome and tears streak his face.

NARCISSUS

Now, alone in the center of the Colosseum. Commodus returns to his box to an endless applause. This is his pure 'Triumph of the Will' moment...

COMMODUS

Narcissus Meridas. Such glory as you have brought to the arena of Rome is redemption for the deeds which condemned you here and thus I cannot find it in my warrior's heart to kill you!

To wild applause Commodus lifts something that's wrapped in silk, unfolds the silk and holds up a wildly colored WOODEN SWORD.

COMMODUS

I honor you with the gift of the wooden sword - your freedom! What say you citizens of Rome!?

The audience goes into a sustained roar of joy. Commodus hands the wooden sword to Quintus who heaves it onto the sand at Narcissus' feet. Then random voices demand that he "SPEAK - SPEAK!" While from the cheap seats: "Don't leave us! Refuse the sword!" This open argument blurs into a cacophony of howls. Then the crowd falls silent.

VOICE

We love you, Narcissus!

NARCISSUS

I am honored that the citizens of Rome, after trying their very best to kill me for so long - have decided I am no longer worth the effort and should be spared!

Roars of laughter. Narcissus looks around.

NARCISSUS

I am not bitter about you, afterall, I have lived very much as you do! In fear! But unlike you, I can lift a sword and strike against that fear - and so you dream of being me! Today I can walk out.

(locks eyes w/Selene)

Today I will walk out!

(to the crowd)

But you are condemned to stay...

Narcissus scoops up a handful of sand and holds it up for all to see, turning in all directions as the SAND MELTS THROUGH HIS FINGERS.

NARCISSUS

Your lives! Citizens of Rome, consider your lives...

He looks up at Commodus - and for just a second it seems like he still might refuse - got Commodus worried. But then he picks up the sword.

NARCISSUS

I accept... Caesar - I accept your generous offer!

CHEERS of support from the crowd mixed with shouts of dismay - the sense that he's really abandoning a segment of the population.

Commodus glows, realizes that he has finally won.

INT. GLADIATOR WAGON - LATE DAY

Narcissus sits pressed between Dala and Proximo.
Vednas holds the coveted wooden sword in his hands
like it was á newborn babe. No one seems to be able
to talk. Finally Bad Teeth GRINS.

BAD TEETH

Fuck a lot of girls for us!

(pause)

Boys too!

PROXIMO

I'll have your gold for you. Even
the third from the Olive Oil.

NARCISSUS

I told you to keep the oil money -
but if you don't want it why don't
you give it to the men?

Adonis and Dala immediately fix on Proximo.

PROXIMO

Let's talk about this later.
Right now we have other things to
settle. You and your family will
be leaving with a supply ship
returning in the morning to Ostia.
From there, Caesar has decreed you
be given an estate in Paestum.
It's beautiful; an old Greek town
right on the ocean. Rich soil.

(pause)

Perhaps we could keep our
financial arrangements... although
Caesar will give you a sort of
pension it's always good to look
to the future, keep you hand in
the arena... so to speak.

NARCISSUS

I want nothing to do with the
arena.

PROXIMO

Something else, then. Do the
chariot races interest you?

KIDS suddenly run alongside the wagon - faces we've
seen before. Dressed in their gladiator-esque
costumes, but today looking pretty pitiful. They
call Narcissus' name - one reaches in and tries to
take his hand but the wagon speeds up leaving them
in the dust.

DALA

You beat the odds - higher than at either the blue or the red betting booths!

Narcissus searches all the faces he's come to know so well in such a short time.

PROXIMO

So, we had a little spark, and we both did very well. Think of me when you're spending that miserable pension... in the sticks.

EXT. TIBER PORT - LATE DAY

The door on the gladiator wagon slips open and Narcissus stands down. Praetorian Guard keep back a crowd shouting Narcissus' name. Quintus escorts him to the dock and the waiting boat.

NARCISSUS

Are you going to kill me here in front of the people of Rome or in front of my family?

Quintus stops and they stare at each other. Quintus flashes his characteristic smile.

QUINTUS

Come on... if you didn't make it to Paestum..? All Rome would know. You're still safe, for now... Take my advice, get on that boat and don't look back.

Quintus gestures to a legionnaire who stands with his back to us.

QUINTUS

See he gets aboard.

Quintus rushes off with Praetorian Guard. Ten remain to keep back a crowd of kids and well-wishers who shout his name. Those people are mostly poor, living without hope, their cheers, the sound of damned souls.

The legionnaire turns and it's the CENTURION, SERVIS. Narcissus is about to react when Servis simply nods toward the ship.

EXT. SHIP'S DECK

as Narcissus climbs on board he spots his family waiting for him. Themis launches into his arms.

THEMIS

Daddy!

As Themis climbs halfway up his body the rest run to meet them and they EMBRACE. Then he sees that Mela and her son Masinissa are with them.

EXT. REAR DECK - NEAR DUSK

At a round table set up on the deck Narcissus, Mela, Selene, Manto, Themis and Masinissa stuff themselves with bread and fruit. CREW working the lines and cargo tie-downs pause to stare at Narcissus - a super-star in their midst.

As they talk, Narcissus breaks off bread, passes olives, oil and fruit he keeps looking back toward the city where again a plume of black smoke rises.

MELA

Quintus' escort attacked us when we were ten leagues from the front. All but Juba died there.

(she hugs her son)

We'll get out of Italy somehow and back to Numidia. I'll raise him like his father.

MANTO

Lucilla saved our lives, father. Everybody wanted to kill us.

SELENE

Manto's right, the leading Senators fell in with Commodus and wanted us sacrificed.

MELA

If Quintus found us, Lucilla... her days are numbered.

Servis returns with some charred lamb and as he lays it out Narcissus pulls up a stool so he can sit with them.

NARCISSUS

What's happening out there?

SERVIS

The Felix troops have gone over to the Senate. Tonight will decide everything. They're fighting the Rome Legions and the Praetorian Guard.

NARCISSUS

Why did Quintus bring in Felix
troops with the Rome legions?

SERVIS

He wanted to make sure Felix
wasn't strong enough back at the
front to revolt. But when these
legionnaire heard about you...

Narcissus rises to study the horizon. He looks like
a General again.

INT. 'CABIN' - NIGHT

Narcissus and Selene wake to the sound of someone
opening their door. Narcissus sees it's Servis and
follows him out. Selene watches the pair framed in
the opening in silhouette. A THIRD MAN joins them.

IT'S PROXIMO

His slave sets a small chest down beside Narcissus.
Then he hands him a large, thick piece of paper.
Narcissus quickly reads it by lamp light.

PROXIMO

Your gold, general. Commodus has
gone crazy - he's declared martial
law. People arrested after curfew
will be used as human torches to
light the Colosseum. I must get
back to seal up the school against
the riots. Spend this wisely.

Narcissus stops him.

NARCISSUS

Lucilla? Any word?

Proximo hesitates, but...

PROXIMO

It is my position to know that...
likely she is to be sacrificed in
the arena. Tomorrow.

Narcissus digests this, then:

NARCISSUS

Commodus must hate you. Free your
gladiators and come with us.

PROXIMO

Are you mad? With all this unrest the Colosseum will be open day and night! Anyway, I'm not political, I'm in the entertainment business.

EXT. DECK - NIGHT

Narcissus watches Proximo scurry down the gang plank and as he does two crewmen pull it up and prepare to depart. Narcissus moves to the rail. Servis joins him strapping.

NARCISSUS

Let me have your sword.

He puts his hand on the gold chest.

NARCISSUS

When you get to Ostia, use this - bribe passage to Africa or Spain. Save my family. You should be able to find a merchant ship that will take you to Egypt then to Numidia.

SELENE

No!

Selene grabs Narcissus, unable to even think about losing him again.

SELENE

You're not going! you have to stay with us!

NARCISSUS

How long do you think Commodus will let us live once he's in power? A month? Half a year? Paestum will be a prison where he'll hold us until it's time...

SELENE

Narcissus!

NARCISSUS

Do you want to see Themis and Manto butchered? If I die fighting Commodus he won't care about you. If I live I'll come and get you.

SELENE

I don't want you to die!

Clinging to him she crumbles into tears.

NARCISSUS

I'll never die. You tell the girls that. You honor our ancestors and I'll be there. Every night. At the table of life.

SELENE

Your daughters need more than some vapors; they need you!

NARCISSUS

They'll have me. Teach them. Don't let them become like these ignorant heaps of citizens without history, without philosophy, without meaning. Teach them of the Greeks, the Babylonians, the Hebrews, the Numidians, the Egyptians and the great Romans. Teach them who we are!

SELENE

You teach them!

NARCISSUS

That's what I'm going to do.
That's what I'm going to do...

Servis unbuckles his sword and hands it over to Narcissus. As the ship starts to move away from shore Narcissus cross to the far rail.

RAIL

Narcissus embraces Selene who is no-way ready to let him go and Servis has to hold her back. Carefully he lowers himself over the side.

EXT. ROME - EARLY MORNING

Narcissus, face muddied, moves carefully through the narrow streets, trying to stay in the side alleys. Vigilant Guards move through the main streets like Brown Shirts - they yank people into the street, lining them up.

VIGILANT LEADER

Caesar has declared this his holiday! Don't you want to be in the arena? All of Rome will be there!

HILLSIDE

As Narcissus approaches Proximo's school he sees the great wooden doors have been smashed aside.

INT. PROXIMO'S SCHOOL

Narcissus moves through smoke from a smoldering structure and into the courtyard. They're all here: Dala, Adonis, the others... as if they'd gathered to make one last stand. All dead. Many have been shot with arrows.

INT. PROXIMO'S OFFICE

Proximo has died at his desk. Every drawer is broken into. Narcissus lays a hand on his head.

NARCISSUS

Looks like they got your money
after all, old friend.

Narcissus looks around the room, spots his Spatha Sword and getting it he uncovers the top of a broken crate and finds that Proximo had kept his MILITARY UNIFORM. Narcissus puts his hands on his old lorica segmentata, the decorations.

EXT. YARD

Wearing a full length toga, Narcissus moves down the hillside. Behind him FLAMES engulf the school.

SIDE STREET

Narcissus comes on a half dozen dead legionnaires with red 'shoulders' - they're from the Felix Division. As he moves slowly he hears marching feet and ducks into an alley as Praetorian Guard pass. Narcissus comes back into the light - then a HUGE CHEER - like some distant NATURAL FORCE - echoes through the air...

INT. COLOSSEUM - DAY

Something HUGE creeps into the arena from the depths of the Colosseum, sun glinting off it's sides as it emerges into the light... the audience GASPS. It's an ENORMOUS BRASS BULL dragged on wheels by slaves into the center of the arena.

The bull 'stands' on all fours, head back, horns rising from the skull like regular bull's horns but finish up as GIANT TRUMPETS AIMED AT THE SKY. The two sides of it's 'ribs' are open but BARS prevent anyone from getting out. The belly of the bull is filled with SENATORS... and Lucilla.

At first the mob is uneasy, but seeing these "high class men" in this absurd machine brings out the laughs.

FALCO

pushes through the senators up to the bars on one side and starts yelling for the crowd to listen to him... but the crowd roars all the more. Arena Slaves stack kindling and logs underneath the brass bull. Jerse stands.

JERSES

In the name of Caesar Marcus Aurelius Commodus Antoninus Augustus, the entire Senate has been found guilty of conspiracy against the emperor!

Again, a mixed response from the crowd. Commodus jumps up, throws off his robe revealing his imposing physique and leaps onto the edge of the lowest wall on the arena.

COMMODUS

These Senators - and my own sister - have determined they should rule Rome! The Empire! They better than an emperor! They better than Julius Caesar! Better than Augustus Octavian! Better than Trajan, Hadrian - or even my divine father, Marcus Aurelius! These names echo down to us throughout history! Name one Senator! One Senator whose name falls from the lips with the same power! I defy you to name one! And as for my sister - shall we now have women running the greatest empire in the history of the world!?

That brings a loud outburst of "NO!" and a background of laughter from the mob.

COMMODUS

Since Romans are accused of not spending enough time in the Senate, I have brought the whole Senate to the people! Let's show them how real Romans treat treachery! Light that fire!

The Slaves heave on a bucket of lampante - highly inflammable olive oil - and another tosses in a torch. Flames roar up around the bull.

INSIDE THE BULL

... like the end of the world. Smoke whips through the openings as SENATORS weep, lunge against the bars or walls and scream. Lucilla kneels, crying. Falco crouches beside her and they embrace.

ARENA

As the fire grows Arena Slaves close hinged panels over the barred openings using poles. Inside the screaming and drumming of fists on hot metal reaches a crescendo.

COMMODUS

stands on his imperial seat watching the last great moment in his final conquest of Rome.

THE BRASS BULL

shaking from the frenzy inside as its belly GLOWS. SCREAMS rise to SHRIEKS and as do the shouts and howls of delight from the crowd.

Finally the cries inside become the animal screeches of PURE PAIN - and that sounds is so DEVASTATING that the mob involuntarily goes quiet. As the sound reaches a horrific crescendo BLACK SMOKE SHOOTS OUT through the trumpets at the top of the bull and THE TRUMPETS SOUND...

EXT. STREETS OF ROME

Narcissus stops, hearing the horns and seeing the TWIN PLUMES rising over the Colosseum. Then the ANIMAL HOWL OF THE MOB...

Narcissus continues through the narrow streets between the high-rise 'insulae', housing the Roman underclass. They're slums with garbage in heaps outside the buildings rummaged by dogs.

He rounds a corner and comes across CHILDREN playing GLADIATOR among the filth. Three KIDS have made wooden swords and a fourth the trident of the retiarius; he even has a 'net' made from a cheap piece of cloth. Narcissus checks them out. Then he turns back to the main street.

EXT. COLOSSEUM - DAY

Narcissus stops yards away, sizing the situation up. Cages of ANIMALS are delivered by a dozen MEN. A ROAR goes up from the arena.

INT. COLOSSEUM ARENA

Carnage. Dead gladiators and animals have been left on the sand. An orchestra of DRUMS resound.

JERSES

Friends and citizen, you are fortunate to live on the most glorious day in the history of Rome! The Fatherland's greatest enemies roam Hades, sent on that eternal mission by our beloved emperor, the demi-god Commodus!

INT. COLOSSEUM PASSAGES

Narcissus sees there are plenty of armed guards at the main entrance into the halls. He turns right into a narrow opening that becomes an internal aqueduct. This he climbs, then leaps down on top of a CAGE. A LION inside leaps up at him and he jumps to the top of the next cage which holds a panther - and another holding a POLAR BEAR.

Narcissus pauses to look down at the magnificent, pacing white animal; clearly never seen anything like it in his life. Then another cage RISES up on an elevator blocking his way. Narcissus almost does a double-take... Inside are CHIMPANZEES dressed as ROMAN SENATORS. He leaps down into a narrow passage.

ARENA

Jerses continues.

JERSES

To show his benevolence and his good standing with all the Gods, Emperor Commodus has negotiated a bargain with Hades himself! The Senators so lately late of Rome are to be returned to us on condition they do so in a form which will vex us no more!

THE CAGE DOOR...

slides open and the Chimps rush out into the arena. When the audience sees them they crack-up.

JERSES

Go! Scurry on! Take your places in the Senate! You have much work to do - for this day the City of Rome is proclaimed renamed the City of Commodus!

The chimps exit, trumpets blow and Arena Slaves run out onto the sand still strewn with dead animals and gladiators. As the crowd 'oos' and 'ahs' they cover the floor of the arena with GOLD DUST until the arena dead seem SCULPTURED IN GOLD.

Drums roll and Commodus enters the arena. He stands in the golden arena and receives wave after wave of applause from the crowd.

BUTCHER SHOP

As the FAT BUTCHER raises his huge cleaver a LIVING ARM reaches out of the carnage and GRABS HIS THROAT. Narcissus shoves a body aside and HEAVES the Fat Butcher over the edge into the lions' cage - his SCREAMS are drowned out by the CHEERS from the arena. Narcissus leaps onto the floor; he heads down toward the main entrance hall.

COMMODUS

faces a Thracian - a man with a round shield and a curved dagger. Commodus easily chops the shield out of the inexperienced man's hand, knocks the man over, straddles him, holds a sword point over the man's heart. He looks up to the crowd. The upscale seats jab their thumbs against their chests... Commodus raises his sword...

NARCISSUS

I want you!

Commodus spins on his heels as the entire arena goes SILENT.

NARCISSUS

stands on the arena floor. He yanks off his cloak and the crowd sees he's wearing his old GENERAL'S UNIFORM. The Thracian runs off...

NARCISSUS

I accuse you, Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus of betraying Rome; of betraying her courageous soldiers for the sake of personal gain! I accuse you of murder: of the Senators of Rome, of untold citizens, of your sister and of poisoning your own father our beloved Marcus Aurelius!

(Narcissus draws his sword)

The punishment is death in the arena...

Commodus stares at this apparition. He turns up toward the imperial box where Quintus is about to come to his rescue when VOICES shout:

CHEAP SEATS
Let them fight! Narcissus!
Narcissus!

People in the upscale seats shout for Commodus. And at that moment Commodus holds up his hand stopping Quintus; can tell by the look on his face he is sick of Narcissus once again throwing his absolute ascendancy up for grabs.

When the audience sees he's going to fight a universal cheer goes up. But he holds up his hand and Quintus tosses down his gilt bow and arrows.

NARCISSUS

moves toward Commodus, a gentle wind stirs his hair and once again he's the noble Roman General - all around is the surreal gold dust coated nightmare of bodies in hideous death poses, a 'golden 'Guernica'.

Narcissus goes straight for him as Commodus hurriedly cocks an arrow... Just as Narcissus is nearly within sword range Commodus hastily fires - he hits Narcissus, but rushed his aim and the arrow sinks into his left shoulder.

Narcissus staggers - cheers and cries of dismay rise together from the audience. But Narcissus manages to strike out splitting the bow... still it's plain he's badly hit. He staggers sideways.

Now Commodus is sure he's got him and holds his hand up stopping Quintus who again moves to enter the arena. Commodus draws his sword... Narcissus responds by BREAKING OFF THE ARROW IN HIS SHOULDER and going right for Commodus.

THE TWO BATTLE IN THE CENTER OF THE ARENA --

Wounded, Narcissus is slowly backed up. The crowd is on edge - cheap seats solidly on Narcissus' side, their enthusiasm unnerves Quintus. He moves Praetorian Guard to flank the seats of the rich.

NARCISSUS

is getting the worst of it, his shoulder bleeds through his armor. Commodus gets stronger, anticipating finally killing his enemy with his own hands. Commodus slams the sword out of Narcissus' hand and Narcissus GOES DOWN...

Behind Commodus the crowd is going truly NUTS - but he just doesn't care: he raises his sword to let the world know he's about to strike the fatal blow when Narcissus TACKLES him at the waist.

Commodus GOES DOWN - sword flying away - and Narcissus is on him, the two roll in the gore and gold dust and Narcissus gets Commodus on his back and starts strangling him with his one good arm.

The cheap seats GO CRAZY - Quintus struggles to pull together a force to get into the arena but people rush into the arena blocking the troops...

AND NARCISSUS --

crushing Commodus down into the golden sand of the Colosseum. He speaks with serenity and power.

NARCISSUS

God, Janus, for saving my family I
sacrifice the emperor of Rome...

He crushes Commodus throat with his bare hand. Quintus stands over him as the rest of the guard battles the crowd. Quintus raises his sword and slams it down... beside Narcissus in the SAND.

EXT. MERCHANT SHIP, OFF COAST OF AFRICA - DAY

Narcissus with Selene, his arms around Themis and Manto on deck watching the coast approach.

END

After Commodus' death the Praetorian Guard auctioned off the position of Roman Emperor to the highest bidder. In response the Army of the Danube marched on Rome, killed the new 'Emperor' and tried to establish a strong government... but the empire slipped into civil war.

The Colosseum and its slaughter of animals and gladiators continued - even through two hundred years of Popes - until German 'barbarians' toppled Rome and put an end to the circus.

¹ "The typical Acta Diurna (Daily Acts) might contain news of gladiatorial contests, astrological omens, notable marriages, births and deaths, public appointments, and trials and executions. Such reading matter complemented the usual fare of military news and plebiscite results also given in the Acta Diurna and presaged the future popularity of such newspaper fillers as horoscopes, the obituary column, and the sports pages." It was started by Julius Caesar in 59 BC.
-Encyclopaedia Britannica

² Borrowed from Fellini but may be an historical artifact.

³ A satirical piece survives from the time of Pharaoh Akhenaton - 1358 BC - describing the wealthy young men of Thebes spending their "... patrimony upon a fast chariot and a span of mettlesome horses tearing around and showing off their prowess." Light, high-priced chariots were the Ferrari of their day.
-Akhenaten, C. Aldred