

## Chapter 12

# The Pissonian Conspiracy

Rome, 65 AD. Where fire had devoured the heart of the eternal city, the construction site of Nero's Golden House now rises from the ashes. In the merciless afternoon sun, dozens labour beneath gleaming scaffolding. Slaves bent double under stone blocks, artisans embedding tiny coloured tiles into future floors, and engineers shouting orders as they assemble the mechanisms for dining rooms that will rotate like the rings of Saturn.

Nero strides through the controlled chaos with keen interest, his imperial robes flowing as he gestures toward various architectural marvels taking shape around him. His eyes shine with the vision of completed grandeur that exists only in his mind. A group of engineers and architects accompany him, scribbling down his every word.

"This shall be the greatest domicile ever constructed in the history of the empire. It will be the beginning of my grand architectural revival. I shall be remembered not merely as Rome's greatest artist, but also as its greatest architect."

A man runs toward them across the construction site, his face flushed with panic and exertion. His naval uniform marks him as an officer, though his dishevelled appearance suggests urgent news.

"Emperor! Emperor!" he calls out.

Tigellinus steps forward like a living shield, fingers curling around his sword hilt as he positions himself between Nero and this breathless intruder. Nero tears his attention from architectural plans at this unexpected interruption.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Volusius Proculus. I command a fleet in your navy. I must tell you something of utmost urgency."

"I don't have time to deal with naval tribulations at the moment," Nero replies dismissively, beginning to turn back toward his architectural wonders.

"Senator Piso conspires to assassinate you!"

Nero stops in his tracks, his entire demeanour shifting from artistic contemplation to predatory focus as he approaches Proculus.

"What did you say?"

"Senator Piso conspires with others to make himself Emperor. They plan your death."

"How do you know this?"

Proculus catches his breath.

"A freedwoman named Epicharis approached me, trying to recruit my fleet to join the assassination plot. She spoke of multiple conspirators, of detailed plans, of timing and methods."

"Tell me everything you know."

"That's all I learned, my Emperor. I refused her immediately and came here as quickly as possible to warn you."

Nero studies the naval officer's face, searching for any trace of deception.

"If what you say proves true, you will be greatly rewarded. Thank you for your loyalty to the empire."

He turns to Epaphroditus, who has been recording architectural notes but now stands ready for imperial commands.

"Find this Epicharis. I should very much like to have a conversation with her. Bring her to the Tullianum."

Epaphroditus bows and hurries away to execute the order, while Nero remains standing among the rising walls of his golden palace.

The Tullianum squats beneath the Capitoline Hill. Built from massive blocks of volcanic tufa, the prison consists of two chambers carved directly into the rock. The upper level where prisoners await judgment, and the lower dungeon where Rome's enemies face their final hours. A narrow opening in the floor connects the chambers, through which condemned souls are lowered into darkness that has swallowed senators, kings, and rebels alike.

Nero descends the stone steps into the lower chamber with Seneca, his imperial robes incongruous in this dark, damp prison. Epicharis lies bound to an interrogation rack, surrounded by Praetorian Guards. Despite her restraints, her eyes burn with defiance that no amount of imperial power has yet managed to extinguish. Nero nods to her with false courtesy.

"Hello, Epicharis. I hope I'm not interrupting anything important."

She spits at him, though the gesture falls short and lands on the stone floor between them.

"How uncivilized."

Nero nods at the guard by the wheel. The man grunts and turns the handle, the ropes creaking as they tighten. Epicharis's body elongates against her will, joints straining beyond their design. A scream rips from her throat, raw and piercing, echoing off the stone walls. Her fingers claw at the air, her face contorting in agony as the rack stretches her joints to the brink.

Nero lifts a hand, and the guard stops. Epicharis gasps, her chest shuddering as she fights to regain her breath.

"Unfortunately, my dear, Proculus told us about your plans. Your conspiracy to make Piso emperor. Tell us your co-conspirators and we can end this unpleasantness."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she gasps.

Nero's smile tightens. He nods again. The wheel turns, slower this time, each click of the mechanism drawing out her torment. Her scream is guttural, her body arching against the ropes as her joints strain, the sinews in her arms and legs trembling under the pressure. The guards watch, unmoving, their faces betraying nothing.

Nero raises a hand, and the stretching halts. Epicharis slumps, panting, sweat dripping from her brow onto the rack.

"We can continue this indefinitely. Why put yourself through such torment? Simply provide the names of your

fellow conspirators and this will end. You might even face mere exile rather than death."

"If I had any information to give you, I would. I have nothing to say."

"So Proculus is lying for no apparent reason?"

"Maybe he just wants to make you paranoid about shadows."

"I wish I could believe you."

He nods sharply at the guard. The wheel turns again, faster now, the ropes groaning as they pull her body taut. Her scream is deafening, a raw, animal sound that claws at the air. Her fingers curl into fists, nails digging into her palms, drawing blood that trickles down her wrists. The guards remain still, their eyes fixed on Nero, awaiting his next command.

Seneca stands in the shadows, his expression showing how unaccustomed the philosopher is to this level of brutality. Nero turns to address him.

"She is the mistress of one of your brothers, is that correct, Seneca?"

"That is correct, my Emperor."

"Do you have reason to distrust her testimony?"

"In my experience, Caesar, loyalty and betrayal often wear identical faces until the moment of crisis reveals their true nature."

Nero studies his former tutor for a long moment, reading the philosopher's face for any sign of deception.

"Perhaps you are working with her."

Seneca chooses his words with the careful calculation of a man walking across thin ice.

"Of course not, my Emperor. My loyalty belongs to you and to Rome itself."

Nero continues to study Seneca and then nods to the guards to continue their work. Despite the prolonged interrogation, Epicharis refuses to provide any information about co-conspirators, her silence as unbreakable as the stone walls that surround them. Nero taps his foot in evident boredom, then motions for the guards to stop.

"I grow weary of these surroundings. I'm certain she will eventually crack, so continue the questioning, but I would much prefer to conduct this business in the comfort of my own palace. Have her transported to my residence. I shall meet you there."

With that dismissal, the Emperor strides from the Tullianum, leaving behind the echoing sounds of an interrogation that shows no signs of yielding the information he needs to identify his enemies.

Nero strides through the marble corridors of his palace as he returns from the Tullianum. The contrast between the prison's dank depths and his golden residence feels stark. Here, sunlight streams through tall windows, illuminating walls decorated with the finest art the empire can provide.

Messalina waits in the atrium, her beauty enhanced by silk robes and precious jewels that mark her status as Empress. She rises gracefully as he approaches, reading the tension in the room with the skill of a woman who has learned to navigate imperial moods.

"My dear wife. I have discovered something terrible."

"What troubles you?"

"Senator Piso seeks to assassinate me and make himself Emperor."

Messalina studies his face with careful attention.

"Are you certain you're not allowing paranoia to cloud your judgment?"

"Proculus brought me the information directly."

"What evidence did he provide?"

"He reported that Epicharis attempted to recruit him and his fleet for the conspiracy."

"Did you question Epicharis personally?"

"Yes. I had her interrogated in the Tullianum all afternoon."

"What did she reveal?"

"Nothing. She refused to speak."

Messalina's expression grows thoughtful.

"Then you cannot know anything with certainty?"

"I feel the truth of it in my bones. I know she will eventually tell me about the conspiracy. I'm having her brought here so we can continue the questioning in more comfortable surroundings."

"Make certain you extract the truth, my husband. Sometimes I fear your own suspicions may prove more dangerous to you than any actual conspiracy."

Nero's expression softens as he looks at her.

"Why couldn't my other wives possess your wisdom?"

Seneca enters the chamber and nervously clears his throat.

"My Emperor."

"Where is Epicharis?"

"There were... complications during transport."

Two Praetorian Guards drag in a lifeless form. Epicharis, her face pale and waxy, dark bruises visible around her throat. They deposit the body on the marble floor like a sack of meat.

"What happened?" Nero demands.

"She strangled herself with her girdle in the transport wagon."

"Strangled herself?"

Nero stares at the corpse in disbelief. He steps closer to Seneca, his eyes blazing with suspicion.

"Perhaps you ensured she died before she could reveal details of the conspiracy that might implicate you."

Seneca freezes in terror, understanding how quickly imperial favour can transform into mortal danger.

"Which of you was responsible for watching her?" Nero asks the guards.

One man steps forward reluctantly.

"I was, my Emperor. She was secured, but alone. I didn't anticipate she would be able to..."

"Tigellinus. Kill him." Nero calls to his Praetorian Prefect.

Without missing a beat, Tigellinus drives his sword through the guard's chest. The man crumples beside Epicharis's body, his blood pooling on the pristine marble floor. Nero looks down at the two corpses at his feet as if bored by them.

"What is next on my schedule?" he asks Seneca.

"The Senate is in session tomorrow morning. Senator Piso is delivering an address. Will you be attending?"

Nero smiles softly.

"I wouldn't miss that for the world." He turns to Tigellinus. "Assume there is indeed a conspiracy developing. Make all necessary preparations to thwart it before it gains momentum. Hopefully they'll prove foolish enough to expose themselves."

The next morning, the Senate house erupts with voices raised in anger and accusation. Nero stands silently at the chamber's edge, studying the scene through half-lidded eyes, as if watching actors perform a tedious play he's seen too many times before. Senator Piso stands at the chamber's heart, his voice carrying to every corner of the vast chamber.

"You have neglected our military while barbarians press our borders! You have murdered members of your own family in fits of paranoid rage! You have alienated the very Senate that forms the backbone of Roman governance! The people will not stand for this tyranny!"

Nero steps forward, his voice cutting through the din with trained projection.

"I may have alienated you, Piso, but I possess something you never will. The genuine love of the Roman people."

"The people know it was you who set Rome ablaze. Do you think us all fools to be deceived by transparent lies?"

"It was the Christians who started the fire, Piso. But fear not, where ash now lies, I will build Rome's greatest architectural marvels."

"You're squandering the empire's entire treasury on lavish building projects while the outer provinces collapse into ruin! The Boudican revolt was merely the beginning. Other provinces will rise in rebellion if this fiscal madness continues!"

"Tell me, Piso, do you believe you would perform better as Emperor?"

"I think a stray dog from the streets would make a better Emperor than you."

The chamber freezes as if Medusa herself had entered. Six hundred senators who moments before had been a storm of motion and noise now stand silent. A stylus drops somewhere in the gallery, the tiny sound ricocheting off marble like a catapult stone. Every man present feels the temperature of the room plummet as they realise Piso has crossed a line.

Nero stands taller, his hand moving to the gladius at his side. With deliberate ceremony, he draws the blade and hurls it so that it clatters to the marble floor at Piso's feet.

"Then strike me down, Piso. Save Rome from my tyranny."

Piso stares at the weapon, then at Nero, his gaze shifting to the Praetorian Guards who stand ready to intervene.

"Spare me the theatrical performance, son of Agrippina. If I pick up your blade, your Praetorian lapdogs will cut me down before I can take a step."

"Guards, you are hereby ordered to allow Piso to strike me down, under penalty of death for interference."

The senators watch in stunned fascination as Piso continues staring at the Emperor, the blade lying between them like a bridge between the republic's past and the empire's future.

"What are you waiting for, Piso? This is your opportunity. Why not pick up that blade and save Rome from collapse? With that steel, you will carve your name into history as the Emperor who rescued the eternal city. Take it."

Piso's heart thunders in his chest as he stares at the gladius glinting on the marble floor. His eyes flick to the Praetorian Guards, their hands resting on their swords, their faces unreadable behind polished helmets. Piso's gaze returns to the gladius, his fingers twitching. With one swift lunge he could end Nero's reign and make himself Emperor. But something flickers across his face, a look of serenity. He turns his head back to Nero and raises his chin.

"The end of your reign will be far more civilized than your reign of terror, my Emperor."

Nero smirks.

"This is precisely why you will never be Emperor, Piso. You lack what it takes to dirty your hands with the blood of your enemies."

Nero pivots on his heel and strides toward the bronze doors, each footfall cracking against marble in the chamber's unnatural quiet.

"Don't be so certain of that, my Emperor," Piso calls after him.

Nero pauses mid-stride, his shoulders tensing. For a moment, the entire Senate holds its breath. Then he

continues walking without looking back, leaving behind a chamber full of men who have just witnessed either supreme confidence or fatal arrogance.

Days later, Nero walks through the smouldering ruins of central Rome among the blackened stones that mark where neighbourhoods once thrived. The great fire's devastation stretches in all directions. Collapsed walls, charred timber beams, and the skeletal remains of shops and homes that housed thousands of Roman citizens.

Epaphroditus trails the emperor like a shadow, scratching furiously at his wax tablets to capture every grandiose pronouncement. A few paces away, Tigellinus stands guard. Nero gestures toward a particularly vast expanse of rubble.

"And here is where I will construct the greatest amphitheatre ever built. It will dwarf even the Theatre of Marcellus, seating eighty thousand spectators who will witness spectacles that rival the Olympics themselves."

A man runs toward them through the ruins in a panic, stumbling over broken stones and debris. Tigellinus immediately moves to intercept him.

"Emperor! I must speak with you!" the man calls out breathlessly.

"Who is that man, Epaphroditus?" Nero asks without taking his eyes off the architectural possibilities before him.

"Milichus, a freedman of Flavius Scaevinus," the secretary replies, consulting his records.

"Go see what he wants."

While Epaphroditus approaches the agitated freedman, Nero continues his survey of the destruction. He walks toward what remains of the area where Peter's church stood. Now nothing but ash and scattered stones. Something catches his eye among the debris: a small wooden crucifix, somehow surviving the inferno that consumed everything around it.

He stares at the artifact with complex emotions, remembering the man who had challenged him with quiet courage and died for his beliefs. The crucifix's survival amongst the flames seems impossible. Epaphroditus returns with Milichus in tow, both men's faces grave with urgent news.

"My Emperor, Milichus reports that he has observed Flavius sharpening his blade as if preparing for battle. He believes the conspirators are about to make their move."

Nero's attention snaps away from the crucifix to focus entirely on this new threat.

"Who are these conspirators, Milichus?"

"Senator Piso leads them, along with Subrius Flavius, Sulpicius Asper, Faenius Rufus, and Plautius Lateranus. There may be others."

"I had wondered why Rufus failed to appear for duty today," Nero muses. He turns to his loyal Praetorian Prefect with decisive authority. "Tigellinus, I was wise to trust you over him. Assemble every guard you can muster. Round up all the named conspirators and bring them to the Tullianum. Move swiftly. If they're preparing to act, we must strike first."

"At once, my Emperor," Tigellinus replies, already signalling to his men.

"Show them no mercy. The time for subtle interrogation has passed. Rome will see what happens to those who plot against their Emperor."

As the Praetorians scatter through the ruined city to hunt down the conspirators, Nero looks once more at the small crucifix lying among the ashes.

Nero descends into the Tullianum's lower chamber with Seneca following close behind. The basement presents a grim tableau of imperial retribution. Bodies of conspirators line the walls. Men who hours before had held senatorial rank and commanded respect throughout the empire, now reduced to broken corpses bearing the marks of intensive interrogation. The ancient stones seem to drink in their blood, adding these deaths to the countless others that have sanctified this place of final judgment.

At the chamber's centre sits a man tied to a chair but notably unharmed, his clothing intact and his face unmarked by torture. He watches Nero's approach with the careful attention of one whose survival depends on maintaining imperial favour.

"Who is this?" Nero asks Seneca.

"Antonius Natalis, my Emperor. We struck an arrangement with him. In exchange for revealing every detail about every conspirator, he would be acquitted of his crimes."

Nero approaches the bound man with interest.

"And where is the ringleader? Where is Piso?"

"He remains at his villa. He has requested permission for a private death," Natalis answers quickly.

"Has he indeed? Well, who am I to disregard the wishes of such an esteemed senator?"

Nero's smile carries no warmth. He turns to Seneca.

"What do you think we should do with our cooperative friend here?"

"Release him, my Emperor. If you earn a reputation as a just and merciful emperor, it will prove much easier to thwart any future conspiracies. Mercy can be more valuable than fear."

"You are so wise, Seneca. We shall grant him freedom."

Nero moves to another figure bound nearby. Seneca's nephew, Lucan. Though bound like the others, the young man holds himself with the quiet confidence of someone who believes his family connections will spare him from the fate of his co-conspirators.

"My dear friend, Lucan. How did such a promising young artist become entangled in such a ghastly conspiracy?" Nero asks with apparent sadness.

"Uncle, please help me. I'm sorry. I was foolish," Lucan pleads, turning to Seneca, who looks at Nero.

"My Emperor, please show mercy to Lucan. He is family to me. I know he has acted wrongly, but he's merely an impressionable young man led astray. I beg for lenient punishment."

Nero steps closer to the bound poet, studying his face with the appreciation of one artist for another.

"Normally I would not be so forgiving. But I have so enjoyed your poetry, Lucan. Your verses show genuine talent. I shall spare you for now."

"Thank you, Emperor," Lucan breathes with relief.

"Thank you, my Emperor," Seneca echoes. "Your kindness and mercy honour the empire."

"Return with your uncle to his villa. I will visit later to discuss the terms of your punishment."

Seneca and Lucan exit the chamber, their footsteps fading up the stone stairs toward daylight and freedom. Nero turns to Tigellinus.

"Now let us pay a visit to our dear friend Piso. I'm curious to see how a senator chooses to meet his end."

Nero and Tigellinus climb the worn stone steps away from the dungeon. Behind them, the Tullianum holds its secrets. Dead men who nearly changed history, their ambitious whispers now silenced forever in chambers few Romans ever leave.

Nero arrives at Piso's villa with Tigellinus and a contingent of Praetorian Guards. The residence speaks of old Roman wealth. Marble columns, carefully tended gardens, and the kind of understated elegance that marks families whose power predates the empire itself.

Inside, they find Piso sitting alone in his atrium, the oil lamps unlit, shadows gathering around him like mourning clothes. He doesn't look up as Nero enters and takes the chair across from him, the two men facing each other in the growing darkness. Piso finally raises his head and shakes it slowly.

"How did a psychopath like you manage to thwart one of the most elaborate assassination plots in Roman history?"

"You have no idea who you're addressing, Piso. You should consider yourself fortunate to be even a footnote in the reign of Rome's greatest Emperor. I have barely begun telling my story. With Rome as my canvas, I shall paint the greatest masterpiece in history with the blood of my enemies. But first, I must coat my brush with your blood."

Piso deflates, his voice carries the weariness of complete defeat.

"By the gods, that's it then. There's nothing left to stop you from reducing Rome to ashes. Well, go on then. Let's finish this. I'd rather die than watch a degenerate burn our empire to the ground."

The senator exposes his neck to the Praetorian Guards in a gesture of defiant surrender. The guards remain motionless, fingers hovering near sword hilts, awaiting orders. When no command comes, Piso's eyes drift back to Nero, who watches with the sardonic smile of a cat observing a cornered mouse.

"A man who plots in secret to murder another, yet lacks the courage to do the deed himself, does not deserve a warrior's death."

Tigellinus enters from deeper in the villa.

"The bath is drawn, my Emperor."

Nero stands up and smiles at the senator.

"Walk with me, Piso."

"I don't take orders from a bastard who murdered his own mother and wife," Piso says.

"It seems you believe your family successfully fled to safety. They came so close to boarding that ship at Portus. If not for Natalis, we might never have caught them."

Piso's defiance crumbles instantly.

"My family have nothing to do with this. Let them go."

"I will give you one opportunity to save their lives. Walk with me to the bath."

Piso stands slowly, the weight of imperial coercion breaking his final resistance. They walk into the villa's bath chamber, where steaming water fills a marble basin. A small knife rests on the basin's edge.

"Get in the bath," Nero commands.

Piso disrobes, his tunic falling to the floor in a heap. He steps into the bath, the hot water scalding his skin, but he doesn't flinch. His eyes are fixed on the knife, his hands trembling as he reaches for it. Nero watches, his expression unreadable.

"The arteries you need to cut are on your wrist and your thigh. Make sure to cut deep."

Piso grips the knife, his knuckles white against the polished bronze handle. The blade glints against pale flesh as he aligns the knife's edge with the delicate map of veins beneath his skin. He inhales sharply, then drags the edge across in one savage motion. A moment's resistance, then flesh parts like ripe fruit. He barely pauses before pressing the knife to his inner thigh, where the femoral artery pulses beneath taut skin. The second cut opens deeper than the first. Blood erupts in twin fountains, first trickling then gushing into the steaming water. It blooms in delicate

crimson clouds, unfurling like silk scarves, before dissolving the bathwater into a murky wine.

His breath hitches in his throat, a sound halfway between a gasp and a sob, as his body begins to convulse with minute tremors. The knife slips from his fingers, disappearing beneath the darkening surface as the warmth of his life seeps away into the tepid embrace of his final bath.

"Just let my family live," Piso says as he draws his last breath.

Nero watches intently as Piso's eyes glaze over, his head slumping forward into the crimson bath. The senator's final exhalation emerges as bubbles breaking the bloody surface, a quiet end for a man who had dreamed of saving Rome from tyranny. Nero stands to his full height.

"Wonderful. Now let's pay a visit to my dear friend Seneca."

Later in the evening, Nero arrives at Seneca's villa with Tigellinus and his guards. Inside, he finds Seneca and Lucan in the atrium, both men rising respectfully as the Emperor enters.

"Welcome, Emperor. Have you met with Piso?"

"Piso has been dealt with," Nero sits down in the atrium across from them, "permanently."

"That is wonderful news, Caesar. What is to be the fate of my dear nephew Lucan?"

"I have conceived the most splendid idea for a poet as talented as your nephew. I will allow him to recite his poetry with musical accompaniment from the Emperor himself."

"You are most generous and kind, my Emperor. History shall remember your mercy fondly."

Nero smiles softly as he stands up to address Seneca.

"Thank you, Seneca. Without your wisdom and guidance, I could never have achieved what we have achieved here together."

Seneca puts his hand on Nero's shoulder and smiles.

"It's been an honour, Emperor."

"Likewise, my old friend."

Nero clasps Seneca's shoulder in kind. The two men exchange a warm look before Nero finishes.

"Now, draw your nephew a hot bath."

Seneca's face pales.

"But he has already bathed today."

Nero's expression hardens as he lowers his voice.

"Draw the bath."

Tears well up in Seneca's eyes as understanding dawns. He exits without another word. Nero sits down next to Lucan.

"I so admired your poetry at the Theatre of Pompey," he says to Lucan conversationally.

"I am only accomplished because of your inspiration, Nero. You have created a culture of artistic excellence. You are a muse for Rome itself."

"Then why plot to kill me?"

Lucan's composure cracks.

"Envy, my Emperor. I knew that as long as you lived, I could never be considered Rome's greatest artist. If I helped Piso remove you, then I might have had a chance to be recognized as the empire's greatest performer."

Seneca returns, his face ashen.

"The bath is drawn."

Nero motions Lucan towards the bath chamber.

"Come, Lucan. Together we shall give Rome the greatest performance she has ever witnessed."

Lucan stands up with Nero. They enter the bath chamber, where steam rises from heated water.

"Prepare yourself, Lucan," Nero commands.

"But I have already bathed, Emperor."

Tigellinus steps into the room, his presence carrying unspoken threats. Nero's voice hardens.

"Get in the bath, Lucan."

Lucan's eyes flash to his uncle Seneca who looks on helplessly. His hands tremble as he disrobes, his tunic falling to the floor. He steps into the hot water, his jaw tight, his eyes fixed on Nero. The Emperor's smile returns, sharp and cruel.

"Are you ready to perform, Lucan? You shall recite your poetry, and I shall accompany you on the lyre."

Lucan nods, his voice barely audible.

"I am ready, Emperor."

"Perfect. Now, we shall make this performance truly historic. Something that will make the gods themselves turn their heads."

Nero hands Lucan a small knife, its blade glinting wickedly. Seneca steps forward, his voice breaking.

"My Emperor, please—"

"Silence," Nero snaps, his gaze never leaving Lucan.

Lucan stares at the knife, his hands shaking.

"Nero, please, I won't do that."

Nero leans closer, his voice a venomous whisper.

“You will, Lucan, because if you don’t, I will cut out your tongue and cut off your hands. You will spend the rest of your life unable to make art, attending to my stables. Useless, mocked, and derided, until the day comes you are begging for this blade. Or you could join me right now and put on a performance so powerful we’ll make Apollo himself envious.”

Lucan’s eyes fill with tears as he takes the knife, his hands trembling. Seneca chokes out.

“Lucan!”

“It’s okay, uncle.”

He drags the blade across his wrists, blood welling instantly, spilling into the water. He begins to cry, soft sobs echoing in the small room. Nero lifts his lyre, his fingers plucking a haunting melody.

“Now, begin reciting your poetry.”

Lucan’s voice trembles as he begins, the words faltering but clear.

*“O lucent herald of the fading day,  
You slip between the olive leaves,  
And bathe the Tiber in your silver fire.  
Rome stands eternal, so they say.  
Yet marble cracks, and kings grow pale,  
While still you rise, unchanged, divine.”*

His voice weakens, his body slumping as the blood swirls in the water. With a final, shuddering breath, Lucan falls silent. Nero stops playing his lyre. Seneca weeps

openly, his hands covering his face. When the tragic performance concludes, Nero turns to console the grieving philosopher.

"I know how difficult it is when family dies. Every member of my family, from my parents to my wives to my only daughter, has perished. Trust that I did what was necessary for the empire and understand that I share your pain."

Seneca wipes away his tears.

"You are right, my Emperor."

"You are a true friend, Seneca."

Nero places his hand on Seneca's shoulder and smiles with apparent warmth. Then his expression shifts.

"Now get in the bath."

The blood drains from Seneca's face.

"What?"

"Where were you today, Seneca?"

The philosopher stands speechless.

"On the day all my enemies sought to betray me, you were nowhere to be found, and your own blood was part of the conspiracy. Do you think me a fool?"

"My Emperor, I swear by all the gods, I swear to you, I knew nothing of any conspiracy. I have always been loyal."

"My dear Seneca, I wish I could believe you. Let's not make this more difficult than necessary."

Seneca nods, tears carving glistening channels down his face as he disrobes, his movements slow and deliberate as a ritual. The fabric of his toga falls away, revealing a body once strong but now softened by age and scholarly pursuits. He steps into the bath, the water now clouded

with Lucan's blood. A rusty haze that swirls around his ankles like wine in water.

He takes the knife, its bronze handle warm from Lucan's grip, and draws it across his left wrist first. The blade bites deep into papery skin, parting flesh with barely a whisper of resistance. Bright arterial blood pulses forth in rhythmic spurts, then slows to a steady stream that spirals into the bathwater, transforming it from pink to crimson.

As Seneca's life ebbs away, his breathing growing shallow and his skin turning alabaster white. Nero kneels beside the bath and watches with fascination, his golden laurel wreath catching the lamplight as he leans forward, pupils dilated with awe.

"You were always one of the few I trusted, Seneca. It breaks my heart to witness this."

"You see, then, that I am not permitted to repay your kindness with the final offerings of my devotion," Seneca whispers.

Their eyes lock as the great philosopher draws his last breath, ending a relationship that had shaped an empire.