

WHEN IN ROME

by Duncan Ley

-SCENE EXCERPT-

## ACT ONE - SCENE TWO

**Setting: The Throne Room at the Imperial Palace.**

(CALIGULA is seated on his throne. CASSIUS and SABINUS are present. DRUSILLA is reclining on the floor at his feet, eating leisurely from a plate of parsley. CAESONIA is standing, still as a statue, to the side of the throne. MNESTER the actor is positioned in front of this tableaux. He is giving a recitation of Euripides' 'Farewell to Alcestis' to the court, full with over-dramatic gestures and articulations)

MNESTER Daughters of Pelias, with farewell from me,  
I' the house of Hades have thy unsunned home!  
Let Hades know, the dark-haired deity,--  
And he who sits to row and steer alike,  
Old corpse-conductor, let him know he bears  
Over the Acherontian lake this time,  
I' the two-oared boat, the best, --oh, best by far  
Of womankind! For thee, Alkestis Queen,  
Many a time those haunters of the Muse  
Shall sing to thee the seven stringèd mountain-shell,  
And glorify in hymns that need no harp,  
At Sparta when the cycle comes about,  
And that Karneian month wherein the moon  
Rises and never sets the whole night through:  
So too at splendid and magnificent-

CALIGULA (*interrupting*) Excuse me, but am I the only one who thinks this is rather over the top?

MNESTER (*stopping*) Caesar?

CALIGULA Mvester, I must inquire, who wrote this rubbish?

MNESTER The playwright and poet Euripides of Athens, Caesar.

CALIGULA Is he left or right-handed?

MNESTER I... I'm not sure, Caesar.

CALIGULA Macro, make a note to invite Euripides of Athens to Rome as a personal guest of the Emperor. When he arrives, ask him which hand he writes with. Then chop it off.

MACRO Yes, Caesar. Might I add though Caesar, that Euripides has been dead for over four hundred years.

CALIGULA No you may not! And being dead is no excuse for sloppy verse! Mvester my dearest actor, you know I always enjoy your evening recitals. But please, don't insult your talent by performing such filth. It's unbecoming. 'The seven stringèd mountain-shell'? Ridiculous expression.

MNESTER Yes, it's so hard to find good writers these days.

CALIGULA Please, retire and entertain yourself at my leisure.

MNESTER Caesar, as always your generosity befits your greatness. (*he exits*)

CALIGULA I like that old man, I really do. (*he looks round*) Where's my uncle?

SABINUS I think he's in his room, Caesar. Writing his histories.

CALIGULA (*exasperated*) What, another one? Why is everyone so believing in their own talent? Macro, go fetch my uncle. I want to play a game with him. (SABINUS leaves to fetch CLAUDIUS) I'm bored. I need entertainment.

DRUSILLA Maybe we could discuss wedding plans, Gaius my love.

CALIGULA I'm not that bored.

DRUSILLA (*moving forward to him*) Dearest brother, I trust you're still as passionate as I. Maybe tonight you will take me into your bedchamber instead of... her. (*glancing at CAESONIA*) Allow me to harden your enthusiasm.

CASSIUS I must excuse myself, Caesar. The hour approaches for the changing of the city guard. (*he moves to leave*)

CALIGULA Before you go, kiss your ex-wife goodnight.

CASSIUS Caesar?

CALIGULA It's only manners, after all. (*CASSIUS walks up to CAESONIA and kisses her cheek*) A proper kiss, Cassius! You won't get much reaction from a woman by just resting your lips on her cheek. (*The two kiss briefly and coldly. CASSIUS then leaves*) He's a bit of a cold fish, that one. Now where's my uncle?

CLAUDIUS (*entering rapidly, followed by SABINUS*) Coming, Caesar, coming. (*he walks up to CALIGULA, twitching earnestly*)

CALIGULA Uncle, how on earth do you manage to shave without cutting your own throat?

CLAUDIUS Caesar?

CALIGULA Never mind. Now, uncle, I have prepared a game. I want you to play it with me.

CLAUDIUS A game, Caesar?

CALIGULA Yes, a game! Don't repeat what I say. I find it irritating. (*he returns to his throne, sitting*) Ten people whom you may or may not know received an invitation to dine at the Imperial Palace. At present they are relaxing in my banquet hall, feasting and drinking.

CLAUDIUS Is this part of the game, Caesar?

CALIGULA Would you shut up and listen! Stop spoiling my fun! As I said, ten people are in there, eating. You, uncle, are the eleventh.

CLAUDIUS You want me to join them, Caesar?

CALIGULA No, no, no! Interrupt me again, Uncle, and I will play a different game with a sword and your belly! You are the eleventh. Now, here comes the game. I give you two choices. First choice. You tell me 'have them killed' and I send my soldiers in and have them killed. Second choice. You tell me 'let them live' and they all keep eating merrily and I have my soldiers kill you.

CLAUDIUS And that's... that's the game?

CALIGULA Yes. The first part anyway.

CLAUDIUS Do I know these ten people, Caesar? Are they friends of mine?

CALIGULA If I answered that it wouldn't make your choice as interesting.

CLAUDIUS Well... I... let's see... ah...

CALIGULA Choose, uncle.

CLAUDIUS I... hmmm. 'Have them killed.'

CALIGULA A wise choice, Uncle.

CLAUDIUS (*relieved*) Thank you, Caesar.

CALIGULA Second part of the game-

CLAUDIUS -Second part?

CALIGULA You must explain why you choose to remain alive and send ten innocent people to their deaths. And if your explanation isn't good enough, you're sent in to join them.

CLAUDIUS I don't want to die, Caesar.

CALIGULA That's not an explanation, that's just being selfish. I'll give you one more chance. And you've got five seconds to come up with your explanation. Five... four... three... two... one. Begin your explanation, uncle.

CLAUDIUS Ah. Hmm. Yes. Right. If... if those ten people in there are killed then they cease to exist. They cease to exist for you, Caesar, and for me.

CALIGULA *(following)* Yes...

CLAUDIUS But if I were killed instead of them, they would still cease to exist for me, because I would be dead. So whichever choice I make, those ten people will cease to exist. Therefore the real choice is whether I wish to live or die. I wish to live.

CALIGULA *(after a pause)* Excellent! Most excellent, uncle. You are a game player of the highest calibre! Sabinus, go and have my guests killed.

SABINUS Caesar. *(he exits)*

CALIGULA You shall win a prize, Uncle, for your efforts. After all, what is a game worth if there is no prize to play for? Messalina is her name. She's one of the palace dancers. You shall marry her.

CLAUDIUS Why, Caesar, I have no need of a wife. *(changing his mind under the weight of CALIGULA's gaze)* But such a generous prize I am most humbled to accept.

CALIGULA Drusilla, you've finished your herbs. I will order another plate.

DRUSILLA But I am full, Jupiter.

CALIGULA You can't get full eating herbs. Caesonia, serve my sister. *(CAESONIA takes the empty plate from DRUSILLA and exits. MACRO enters)*

MACRO I've just received the Commander's report, Caesar.

CALIGULA And how is the greatest city in the world today, Macro?

MACRO *(producing an electronic notebook and reading from it)* It is unhappy, Caesar. Bread supplies are low, fires destroyed four tenement blocks in the Greek Quarter and there was a near riot at the Games.

CALIGULA I don't like you very much, Macro. You always bring me bad news. What's this about a riot?

MACRO Apparently the Games Administration can no longer afford to feed the wild animals. The crowds were not happy when the only lion left collapsed and died after walking into the arena.

CALIGULA And just why can't they afford to feed my animals?

MACRO It seems butchers are raising the price of meat to keep up with your latest tax increase, Caesar.

CALIGULA Rather mercenary of them. Oh well, instead of feeding the animals meat, tell the administration to feed them criminals.

MACRO I'm sorry, Caesar. Did you say criminals?

CALIGULA The prisons are well-stocked. It will help relieve some of the pressure on the justice system.

MACRO Very good, Caesar. *(CAESONIA enters with a replenished plate of herbs. Wordlessly she gives the plate to DRUSILLA, who begins eating)* There are also unpleasant rumours circulating in the markets. It seems, Caesar, there might be a great deal of civil unrest if you marry your sister.

CALIGULA People can be so despicable. What reason have they for harbouring discontent?

MACRO My spies mention that the word 'perverse' is being frequently used to describe the impending union.

CALIGULA Perverse? Perverse! I wish all Romans had only one neck! Am I not generous? Am I not just? Am I not the closest creation to a God Rome has ever lived under? I don't involve myself in their personal affairs; why should they involve themselves in mine? I am the master here! Tell all Romans their heads lie in the jaws of a crocodile and those jaws will snap shut if their Emperor so decides!

MACRO *(unperturbed by CALIGULA's ranting)* There are no crocodiles in Rome, Caesar.

CALIGULA I was using a metaphor, you idiot!

MACRO Very good, Caesar.

CALIGULA Tomorrow you will take an entire regiment to the marketplace. As soon as you hear any derogatory comment about my impending marriage you will slaughter each and every man, woman and child in the market at the time.

MACRO Yes, Caesar.

CALIGULA That'll stop tongues wagging for a while. What do you think, Uncle?

CLAUDIUS A formidable warning, Caesar.

CALIGULA 'Formidable'. I like that.

CLAUDIUS But aren't you dispensing more mercy than justice, Caesar?

CALIGULA I wasn't aware of it.

CLAUDIUS Why yes, Caesar! You're far too merciful to those wretched enough that they seek to undermine your natural union with your sister.

CALIGULA Really?

CLAUDIUS Surely Caesar, instead of merely slaughtering the women and children, have them witness the death of their husbands. Let them live, but with that memory to scold their misguided judgement.

CALIGULA (*with a sigh*) Once again my Senior Consul proves there is more to a man than fixtured frailty. I applaud your cunning, I really do. Macro, go and fetch Mnester. Tell the old man to meet me on my balcony. I wish to watch the stars fall down over my city with him. (MACRO *exits, and CALIGULA muses*) From my balcony the stars are always beautiful. I think sometimes that the sea is night and the night is the sea, floating above us, and the stars are fish and we, we all - mere bones at the bottom of the night's dark ocean. (*he stumbles. DRUSILLA goes to him, while CAESONIA and CLAUDIUS remain where they are and exchange a look*) Don't touch me! (DRUSILLA, *startled, retreats. CALIGULA sits*) Uncle, my only friend, sit with me. (DRUSILLA *coughs*) And don't cough!

DRUSILLA (*trying to stop as CLAUDIUS joins CALIGULA*) Yes Caesar.

CALIGULA (*speaking now in almost conspiratorial tones*) You're more than family to me, Uncle. You are my friend, aren't you?

CLAUDIUS Why, yes Caesar.

CALIGULA That is good. All men need friends. Uncle, the Gods came to me again last night.

CLAUDIUS That is indeed good news, Caesar.

CALIGULA (*gently*) Don't interrupt me, Uncle. There isn't time. The Gods took me through the streets of Rome. They showed me all the people sleeping in their beds, hiding in the alleys, loving in the shadows. Then the Gods asked, "Gaius, to rule these cattle of Rome what is the one thing you must insist on?" And I answered, "Absolute power."

CLAUDIUS A wise response.

CALIGULA I thought so too, Uncle. But the Gods did not agree. "Absolute power?" they cried. "You fool! There is no such thing as absolute power. There is only absolute compliance. For if people are compliant you have power over them, and if they are absolute in their compliance you will rule for a thousand years. But if they choose not to comply, your rule will become a mere stain of history." What do you think I asked them next, Uncle?

CLAUDIUS (*thinking*) "How do I ensure compliance?" (DRUSILLA *coughs*)

CALIGULA You are a wise fool, Uncle Claudius, a wise fool. That is what I asked them. "How do I ensure compliance?" They answered as one. "Keep a dog on a chain, it will still love you. Deny a dog exercise and freedom, it will still love you. Beat a dog, it will still love you. But tell the dog to love and obey a cat, it will rebel, for you are asking it to accept something against its understanding of nature." (DRUSILLA *starts coughing again, and although she tries, she cannot stop*) So you see, dear Uncle, once more the Gods show me truth. I can beat the cattle of Rome, they will love me. I can deny them freedom, they will love me. But ask them to accept a sister's love of a brother, they will rise and rebel. (DRUSILLA *starts to convulse*) And now I realise that is the one thing I cannot ask them to do. (DRUSILLA *falls*)

*to her knees, in agony. CALIGULA rises and stands over her*) I will punish Rome for sacrificing my sister as payment for their compliance. Go gently sister, for the slaughter of your ambition will allow your brother to rule for a thousand years. (*DRUSILLA dies, her face twisted into mask of horror*) Caesonia. Come forward and become my wife. Claudius, have the soldiers in the marketplace hold their swords in their scabbards and touch no-one. Have all of Rome know the passionate grief a brother holds for the death of his sister. And now I retire, to grieve. (*they turn to leave*)

CAESONIA Oh, and Claudius? Don't touch the herbs on that plate. (*they exit, leaving CLAUDIUS alone*)

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