

SEED

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EXT. CHINATOWN, NEW YORK CITY - EVENING

It is a bitterly cold winter's day and the sidewalks are covered in icy grey slush.

A young woman bundled up in a cheap down jacket struggles with bags of groceries, her face barely visible between her woollen hat and scarf.

She dips inside a steamy Chinese restaurant, only to appear a moment later carrying another bag.

Stepping carefully past the fishmonger's buckets that jut out into the street, the woman picks her way to the graffiti-covered door of a rundown apartment building.

Her gloved fingers fumble with the key as she opens the door.

INT. CHINATOWN APARTMENT, STAIRWAY

The door slams closed with a CLANG and the woman starts the slow climb up four flights of stairs.

As she goes, she peels off layer after layer: first her gloves, hat, scarf, then the zipper of her jacket comes down.

At last we can see her properly. This is LEILA (29). Fair and slight, she wears a cheap blouse with a name tag that announces: HI! I'M LEILA, I'M HERE TO HELP!

INT. LEILA & TOMASO'S APARTMENT

The locks on a badly painted apartment door rattle before finally the door opens.

Leila steps inside, dropping her bags. The apartment is tiny: one small bedroom off an awkwardly angled kitchen and living space. A voice calls out to her:

TOMASO (O.C.)  
I'm in here.

Still wearing her snow-flecked jacket she shuffles round into the bedroom where her husband TOMASO (33) sits at a small desk surrounded by papers.

Dark haired and unshaven, Tomaso's handsome face is crinkled with stress. He looks up at Leila.

Her cheeks are rosy and flushed and her hair is a mess. In spite of it all she is beautiful. He can't help smiling.

Standing to kiss her, he helps her shrug off her jacket and before she can stop him, he pushes her back onto the bed.

TOMASO (CONT'D)  
Well Good Evening Mrs Argenti.  
(nuzzling her)  
Your cheeks are freezing.

LEILA  
Tommy. Come on. Take-out's going cold.

She pretends to be annoyed but her face tells us otherwise.

LEILA (CONT'D)  
How'd it go today?  
(getting only kisses in response)  
Did they say they'd hire you again?

TOMASO  
I'll hire you again.

LEILA  
Seriously. What did they say?

Tomaso stops and sits up on his elbow.

TOMASO  
They might. But Italian translators aren't exactly in demand. I'm just going to keep working on the book.

LEILA  
Baby, you know I believe in you. But the book's not going to pay next month's rent. Or this month's for that matter.

Tomaso buries himself in her hair to get away.

LEILA (CONT'D)  
Are you sure you don't want to call your sister back?

TOMASO  
I don't need their money.

LEILA  
Well... we kinda do.

She says this laughing, looking around their ramshackle apartment. It's a conversation they've had before.

But Tomaso is not listening, he's already gone back to kissing her neck and unbuttoning her uniform.

Leila runs her fingers through his thick dark hair, a smile playing on her lips. Their chemistry is undeniable.

Just as things start to heat up, she pulls him back so that she can look him in the eye.

LEILA (CONT'D)

I love you so much.

He responds by kissing her, hungrily, pulling off his shirt as she slips off her underwear.

They begin to make love with a sweet desperation. As if the answers to their problems might be found in the other's embrace.

INT. WAITING ROOM, OBGYN'S OFFICE - DAY

Tomaso and Leila wait anxiously in the modest reception of a state-run OBGYN clinic. Around them a collection of New York's broke and uninsured mothers-to-be.

An exhausted nurse appears with a clipboard:

NURSE

Leila and Tomaso Argenti?

They look up: Tomaso's eyes full of hope, Leila's full of apprehension.

INT. EXAMINATION ROOM, OBGYN'S OFFICE - LATER

Leila wears a surgical gown, propped up on a bed with her feet in stirrups. Tomaso clutches her hand tight.

A harried-looking OBGYN, DR RUSSELL (50s), is performing a transvaginal ultrasound. All eyes are on the monitor.

DR. RUSSELL

And you said your last period was...

Before Leila has a chance to answer, Tomaso jumps in eagerly.

TOMASO

December 14th. She's 10 weeks exactly.

Dr. Russell says nothing as she continues to sweep the uterine wall, looking at the screen.

The silence is agonizing. Leila turns away. Her free hand goes to a small silver cross around her neck.

Tomaso's eyes hungrily scan the image on the monitor, unable to see what is becoming increasingly apparent to Dr. Russell.

DR. RUSSELL

Leila, I'm so sorry to have to tell you this...

Leila closes her eyes.

DR. RUSSELL (CONT'D)

...I'm afraid it looks like the embryo stopped growing some time ago.

TOMASO

What does that mean?

DR. RUSSELL

I'm afraid the pregnancy has miscarried. I'm so sorry.

Tomaso is devastated, his face crumples with disappointment.

Leila's hands cover her face. She peers at Dr. Russell over her fingers. For a moment we see a glimmer of something like relief in her eyes.

INT. APARTMENT - EVENING

Leila and Tomaso sit at their fold-out dining table in silence, neither one touching the microwave dinner in front of them. Tomaso's eyes are puffy and tired. Leila looks numb.

We continue to hear Dr. Russell's voice throughout.

DR. RUSSELL (O.C.)

What is important is that you remember that you didn't do anything wrong. This is no one's fault. One in four pregnancies miscarry in the first 10 weeks and it doesn't necessarily mean you'll have any trouble conceiving again.

INT. DR. RUSSELL'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

We are back at the clinic but now Leila is dressed and they are sitting in Dr. Russell's office.

DR. RUSSELL (CONT'D)

What you need to think about now is how you want to move forward. Since the miscarriage is what we call incomplete, you can either wait for the body to go through its natural process and expel the embryo or some people prefer to opt for surgical completion, which we can arrange in the next few days.

LEILA

I want to wait.

Leila has retreated into herself. She is cool and calm.

LEILA (CONT'D)

We can't afford the surgery anyway.

TOMASO

Leila, we can find the money. You should have the surgery if you want.

LEILA

(definitive)

I'll wait.

Dr. Russell, sensitive, gives them a moment. When she speaks again her voice is gentle, reassuring.

DR. RUSSELL

You'll likely experience cramping and bleeding, not unlike a heavy period.

INT. APARTMENT - EVENING

Leila and Tomaso get ready for bed. They shuffle around each other silently. Almost afraid to make eye contact.

LEILA (O.C.)

How long will it take? For it to be out of me?

As she tries to get past him, Tomaso suddenly reaches out, grabbing her by the waist. He pulls her into his body.

Leila allows him to hold her, feeling his grief, his pain.

INT. DR. RUSSELL'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

DR. RUSSELL

It could happen any time in the next couple of weeks. In the meantime you should try to relax. You may continue to experience morning sickness: nausea, vomiting. Take some time off if you can. It's natural to grieve at a time like this.

Tomaso nods, taking this all in, but Leila is in a world of her own, staring off into space.

INT. BEDROOM, APARTMENT - NIGHT

Tomaso and Leila lie side by side in bed. They are both wide awake, staring into the darkness.

Leila shuts her eyes tight, trying to force herself to sleep.

CUT TO:

A fleeting IMAGE of Leila on a wide staircase in a loose white dress. Her face is deathly pale. CRIMSON BLOOD blooms over the white fabric. Her hands are covered in BLOOD.

BACK TO:

Leila's eyes OPEN WIDE in the dark bedroom. After a few seconds, she closes them tight again.

CUT TO:

Another image FLASHES momentarily before us. Leila as a YOUNG GIRL (8), wearing a white nightie. Her face is pale and struck with terror, her hands covered in BLOOD.

A phone RINGS loudly.

BACK TO:

Leila's eyes OPEN. The kitchen phone is RINGING loudly.

Though they are both awake, neither Tomaso nor Leila gets up to answer it. Soon the machine kicks in:

## VOICEMAIL

(Tomaso & Leila's voices  
in unison, playful)  
You've reached Mr & Mrs Tomaso and  
Leila Argenti. You know what to do.  
(after a BEEP, a woman's  
voice)  
Tomaso. It's me. Again. I wish you  
would answer. Papé's getting worse.  
He's not going to be with us long.  
You need to be here. With your  
family. Please just call.

The machine clicks off, leaving Tomaso and Leila in silence again. Neither speaks.

INT. BATHROOM, APARTMENT - MORNING

Leila is taking a shower in the cracked pink bathtub. On the other side of the curtain, Tomaso is brushing his teeth.

LEILA (O.C.)  
I want to go to Italy.

TOMASO  
What?

LEILA (O.C.)  
I think we should go and see your  
father before it's too late.

We move over to Leila's side of the curtain. Scalding hot water rushes over her naked body as she continues.

LEILA (CONT'D)  
There's nothing keeping us here.  
We're broke. We hate this  
apartment. Maybe we could go for a  
couple of months. Your sister keeps  
offering to pay. Why don't we just  
do it?

Tomaso looks in the mirror, his expression unreadable.

LEILA (O.C.) (CONT'D)  
If you don't make peace with him.  
You'll regret it for the rest of  
your life. Believe me.

Her tone tells us she is speaking from experience. Tomaso doesn't respond. The water stops and the curtain opens.

Leila stands dripping wet, naked and vulnerable.

LEILA (CONT'D)

I think we need this. *I* need this.  
I need to get out of this place.  
Just for a bit.

Tomaso's face softens. He wraps his arms around Leila getting soaked in the process. He would do anything for this woman.

TOMASO

(softly)  
Okay.

Leila squeezes him tight as they cling to one another.

INT. DELTA AIRLINES FLIGHT - NIGHT

The economy cabin of the long-haul flight to Pisa is dark. Leila sits by the window, staring out at the black sky.

She turns to see Tomaso, who has fallen asleep with his head at an awkward angle.

Tenderly she moves his chin back so that his head rests against the seat. She closes her eyes.

EXT. PISA AEROPORTO, TRAIN PLATFORM - DAY

It is a crisp, bright early spring day in Tuscany. Leila and Tomaso, looking dishevelled, climb aboard a tiny local train.

INT. TRENITALIA, 2ND CLASS CARRIAGE

They take their seats facing one another, knees almost knocking. There is a hint of youthful excitement in Leila's eyes as the train pulls away from the platform.

Tomaso checks his watch. He seems preoccupied.

LEILA

You nervous?

TOMASO

I didn't exactly leave on the best of terms.

LEILA

Tomaso, it's been 15 years. Your family just want to see you. Aren't you even a little excited to see them? He's your dad.

TOMASO

He's a crook. A wealthy, charming crook who happens to have the same last name as me. That's about the extent of it. I don't even know why we're here.

Leila looks out of the window, feeling chastened. Tomaso realizes he was too harsh.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

(trying to be positive)

I'm excited to see the house. And I have a niece. Francesca.

LEILA

Myrra's daughter?

TOMASO

She was only a toddler when I left. I'm excited to see her.

He smiles at her, it's an olive branch.

LEILA

I'm excited to meet all of them. To see where you come from. You never talk about this place. Look how beautiful it is.

Leila stares out at the Tuscan landscape whipping past the window. They couldn't be further from the grind of New York.

I/E. LOCAL TAXI, EN ROUTE TO CASTIGLIONE - AFTERNOON

Tomaso and Leila are in the backseat of a taxi making its slow ascent up a narrow windy mountain road.

Tomaso looks over at Leila who is looking rather pale.

TOMASO

You okay?

LEILA

Morning sickness.

The landscape here is vast and rugged. The mountain tops are still capped in snow. Pale yellow primroses scattered by the roadside the only promise of new life.

At the top of a nearby peak they see a tiny village perched in solitary dominance.

TOMASO

There. That's it. Castiglione di  
Garfagnana. That's home.

The walled medieval village sits silently above them.  
Impressive and yet foreboding.

I/E. TAXI, ARRIVING IN CASTIGLIONE - MOMENTS LATER

The sun is low in the sky as the car pulls through the main  
gate of the thick stone walls. It's like entering a fortress.

The taxi crawls over the cobbled streets, up an alley barely  
wide enough for a car, before stopping outside a magnificent  
old palazzo with an expansive courtyard in front.

TOMASO

This is it.

Leila's jaw drops. She is thrilled but also suddenly nervous.

The appearance of a beautiful and elegantly dressed Italian  
woman only serves to make Leila more self-conscious.

MYRRA (48) is a timeless beauty. Her features are refined,  
handsome, imperial.

LEILA

(whispered disbelief)

That's your sister? I thought you  
said she was old.

(looking down at herself)

Jesus. I look terrible.

TOMASO

Don't be crazy. You're beautiful.  
Come on, let's do this.

Tomaso pays the driver and steps out of the car. Leila  
watches from the back seat as the woman embraces Tomaso.

MYRRA

*Bentornato, Tomaso.*

He steps into her arms, albeit a little awkwardly.

TOMASO

*Myrra. Sempre bellissima.*

Leila emerges shyly and Myrra's eyes take her in instantly.  
Myrra opens her arms again. The gesture is warm but it feels  
slightly staged. She speaks perfect English.

MYRRA

You must be Leila. My new sister.  
Welcome.

She kisses Leila on either cheek and leads the pair inside.

INT. PALAZZO ARGENTI, DOWNSTAIRS

Inside, the old palazzo is simple and rustic. Thick stone walls, terracotta floors, chestnut beams, huge fireplaces.

Leila tries to absorb every detail, looking through doorways as Myrra leads them to the main staircase.

Tomaso too finds himself impressed by the familiar beauty of his former home. He runs his hand along the cool stone walls.

They pass half a dozen people as they walk through the palazzo, some cleaning floors, others carrying firewood. The place is busy and full of life.

An older Italian woman with a curved back, TERESA (70), approaches them. She GASPS when she sees Tomaso and before he can react she takes his hand and kisses it reverently.

TERESA

Little Tomasino. *Bentornato*.

Tomaso is confused. He does not remember this woman who greets him so warmly.

Before he can respond, Myrra nods at Teresa. Deferential, the old woman releases Tomaso's hand and moves away.

MYRRA

(to Leila)

Teresa was one of Tomaso's wet nurses.

(looking at Tomaso)

He seems to have forgotten us.

Myrra turns her back on them and keeps walking. Leila looks at Tomaso and mouths, "Wet nurse?". Tomaso shrugs and makes a face. Leila giggles silently.

INT. LEILA & TOMASO'S BEDROOM

Myrra opens a door to an upstairs room, revealing a stunning four-poster bed with breathtaking views of the mountains at sunset. Leila follows her in, mouth agape.

A private bathroom, with an enormous marble bath and a small private balcony, adjoins the bedroom.

Leila's eyes are full of wonder. Tomaso smiles to see her happy.

MYRRA

As soon as you've had a chance to bathe and change you must come to see Papé. He is very weak.

(turning to leave)

I'm pleased you changed your mind Tomaso. This is where you belong. Both of you.

She closes the door behind her, leaving the couple alone. Leila can barely contain herself as she flops onto the bed.

LEILA

I can't believe you grew up here. How could you bear to leave?

Tomaso has already begun unpacking. He smiles at his wife's enthusiasm but cannot seem to muster the same himself.

He opens the bedside drawer and finds a hardback book. He picks it up critically.

The cover is embossed with an ouroboros, a snake eating its own tail, and the title: THE CIRCLE OF PLEASURE & PURITY. On the back, a picture of the author, ALFREDO "Papé" ARGENTI.

LEILA (CONT'D)

Is that your father's book?

Tomaso seems to scoff, tossing it down onto the bed where Leila picks it up and starts reading the back.

LEILA (CONT'D)

Looks kind of interesting.

TOMASO

Trust me. It's not. I can't even believe its still in print. It's embarrassing.

LEILA

(gesturing to the luxury of their surroundings)  
It can't be that bad.

TOMASO

(snatching back the book)  
 My father likes to present himself  
 as some kind of all-seeing all-  
 knowing guru. Just because some  
 people are stupid enough to fall  
 for his spiritual bullshit doesn't  
 make it any less absurd.

LEILA

Sorry...

Leila rolls away from him, but just as she's about to get up,  
 he takes her wrist.

TOMASO

No. I'm sorry. I'm just-  
 (anxious, vulnerable)  
 What am I supposed to say to him?

Clambering to her knees, Leila takes her husband in her arms.

LEILA

It's going to be fine. It's going  
 to be more than fine. He'll be so  
 happy to see you. You'll know what  
 to say.

He rests his head against her, surrendered. On the bed his  
 father's face looks up at him from the book jacket.

Gathering himself, he takes a breath and looks at Leila.

TOMASO

How are *you* feeling?

Leila shrugs silently, her eyes inadvertently casting down to  
 her flat stomach. It pains Tomaso to see her like this.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

If I could go through this for you  
 I would, you know that don't you?  
 (embracing her again)  
 I know we hadn't exactly planned on  
 getting pregnant this soon but now  
 that we've come this close it's  
 made me realize how ready I am to  
 start a family. I love you so much  
 Leila. You're my life now.

LEILA

And you're mine. We're a team,  
 Tommy. You and me, we're a family.  
 Maybe that's enough for now.

(MORE)

LEILA (CONT'D)  
(hesitant)  
Maybe things happen for a reason.

Failing to read between the lines, Tomaso only holds her tighter.

INT. PALAZZO ARGENTI, UPSTAIRS - NIGHT

Tomaso and Leila emerge from their bedroom looking freshly scrubbed and wearing crinkled clean clothes.

They seem like children, nervous, as they make their way down the hallway. Tomaso looks to Leila, anxious. She gives him a reassuring look, squeezing his hand.

They pass several people as they go, none of whom are familiar to Tomaso, all of whom nod their heads to him deferentially. Leila notices but says nothing.

In the open doorway of a room at the end of the hall stands Myrra, quietly ordering people around.

She looks up and spots Tomaso and Leila approaching.

INT. PAPÉ'S BEDROOM, PALAZZO

Myrra guides Tomaso and Leila into Papé's bedroom, where the ailing patriarch lies dying in a huge canopied bed.

"PAPÉ" ARGENTI (80) is much older and frailer than his picture on the book jacket. The flesh seems to have fallen off his bones, leaving a wizened husk.

Beside his bed is a handsome Italian doctor, DR. ROSSI (38) whose grave, calm face tells us there is little to be done.

In one corner, Teresa sits weeping and muttering indecipherable prayers. Several women move around bringing and clearing food, water and linens.

Tomaso feels strangely unmoved as he watches the doctor listen to Papé's chest.

Myrra beckons him over to the bed and he lets go of Leila's hand to move closer to his father. Leila looks very pale.

She seems to sway slightly on her feet as her eyes scan from the weeping woman to the stern doctor and over to the dying man. She is overwhelmed.

CUT TO:

INT. CATHOLIC CHURCH - TWENTY YEARS AGO

Young Leila (8) stands in a black velvet dress at the front of a tiny congregation in a rundown Catholic church. The words of the priest drone quietly in the background.

PRIEST

"I am the resurrection and the life. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

Young Leila's eyes scan from the weeping women in the adjacent pews to the towering priest before her, finally resting on two modest wooden caskets, side by side.

MYRRA (V.O.)

Leila.

BACK TO:

INT. PAPE'S BEDROOM, PALAZZO

Myrra is standing close at Leila's side. She looks at Leila's pale, clammy face.

MYRRA

Leila? Are you alright?

Leila snaps out of her daze. She nods silently but she does not feel well. Her hand goes to the cross around her neck.

Over on the bed, Tomaso reaches out to take his father's hand. It feels dry and alien in his own.

DR. ROSSI

(with a thick accent)

Papé does not have long. It is good you came.

He stands and heads for the door. Myrra beckons for everyone else to go, leaving Leila, Tomaso and Myrra with Papé.

The old man's eyes slowly flutter open. Tomaso takes an expectant breath as they look at one another.

But Papé shows no sign of recognizing his son.

Then Papé's eyes glance over to Leila. He frees his papery hand from Tomaso's and points at her with a shaking finger.

Surprised and embarrassed, Leila allows Myrra to guide her towards the bed. Tomaso makes room for her.

Pap  reaches out his hand to her face and, tentatively, Leila leans into his touch. For a moment no one breathes.

Seeing his father's tenderness towards his wife, Tomaso suddenly feels an unexpected welling of emotion.

Pap 's lips begin to move, silently, as though he is trying to speak. Leila, trembling with nerves, leans in closer.

Suddenly and with surprising vigor, Pap 's hand reaches up and pulls Leila's face towards his.

He KISSES her hard on the mouth, holding her face tight to his wrinkled lips and wet gums.

Leila, horrified, struggles to pull back. Tomaso lunges forward, trying to help Leila.

Eventually Leila pushes the old man back down onto the pillow, breaking free of his grip. She staggers back, upset, breathless.

In the bed, Pap  seems to smile for a split second before his eyes roll back in his head and his body is gripped in spasm.

Myrra rushes to his side, as Tomaso rushes to Leila's.

LEILA'S POV:

The world seems to spin and the sound is MUTED.

She sees Myrra calling for Dr Rossi who comes rushing in and she sees Tomaso, hovering over her, his face full of concern.

As her vision begins to TUNNEL and her ears start to RING, Leila passes out, plunging us into BLACKNESS.

INT. DR. ROSSI'S CLINIC, CASTELNUOVO - DAY

Located lower down in the valley, Castelnuovo is the closest town to Castiglione. Dr. Rossi's clinic is small but clean, catering to local families.

Leila and Tomaso find themselves in a familiar position, with Leila on the table being given an ultrasound and Tomaso staring at a monitor. They both look stunned.

LEILA

I don't understand how this can be possible.

TOMASO

Are you sure?

DR. ROSSI

(pointing to the monitor)  
Of course. Look, you can see for yourself.

LEILA

(not looking)  
But it was dead. The doctor told us it had died.

Dr. Rossi points to a tiny, pulsating blob on the screen. Along with the steady THUMP of Leila's heartbeat, there is the rapid flutter of another.

DR. ROSSI

Heartbeat looks perfect.  
(off her look of disbelief)  
Misdiagnoses of miscarriage happen more than you would think. Doctors make mistakes. I am sorry you have suffered this terrible news for no reason. But this is no mistake.

Tomaso squeezes Leila's arm. He stares at the screen in awe.

TOMASO

That's our baby.

Leila is too stunned to speak.

DR. ROSSI

You're still in the first *trimestre* so you must take it easy. I know there is a lot going on at the palazzo with the funeral preparations but you must rest. Your blood pressure is low, which is why you fainted. Not unusual, but we need to keep an eye on you. If you want, I can drive you both back up to Castiglione myself.

TOMASO

No, no. I'm sure we can find a taxi. You've already done so much.

DR. ROSSI

Nonsense. I am going home for lunch, you will come in my car.

TOMASO  
You live in the village?

DR. ROSSI  
I live in your house! We're family,  
Sr. Argenti. I married your cousin  
Debora.

Tomaso is embarrassed at his ignorance but Dr. Rossi laughs.

TOMASO  
I'm so sorry. Of course. Debora.  
That's wonderful. In that case we  
would love a lift.

DR. ROSSI  
(to Leila)  
And you must go straight to bed. I  
will check on you later tonight.

TOMASO  
Your very own live-in doctor. How  
about that?

Leila is still lost in thought, staring at the pixilated  
image on the screen with its steady heartbeat.

I/E. DR. ROSSI'S CAR, ROAD TO CASTIGLIONE - DAY

Leila is sitting in the back seat of Dr. Rossi's car as it  
speeds up the mountain. She stares out the window, stroking  
her still flat belly as though searching for answers.

She tunes in and out of the conversation in the front,  
catching snatches of small talk about village life.

Tomaso turns back to look at her. He reaches for her hand,  
bursting with happiness. Leila concedes a smile and then  
closes her eyes, feigning tiredness.

INT. MAIN HALL DOWNSTAIRS, PALAZZO - DAY

Outside it has started to rain and the air in the palazzo is  
heavy when Tomaso, Leila and Dr Rossi enter.

The palazzo is bustling with movement as two dozen people  
move around making preparations for the funeral. Two long  
tables are being laid for what appears to be a great feast.  
Ivy is laced around bottles of homemade red wine.

The mood is solemn as everyone works in silence.

LEILA

(to Tomaso, hushed)

Do all these people work for your family?

DR. ROSSI

(amused)

They don't work here.

(by way of explanation)

Former residents have been arriving all week. Your father will be greatly missed.

LEILA

Residents?

Just then Dr Rossi spots Myrra on the far side of the hall.

DR. ROSSI

If you'll excuse me, I must speak with your sister.

He moves away hurriedly and as he does, an AMERICAN WOMAN (40s) approaches Leila and Tomaso.

AMERICAN WOMAN

Mr Argenti?

Tomaso barely nods before the woman reaches out and takes his hands in hers. She looks him in the eye, earnestly.

AMERICAN WOMAN (CONT'D)

You don't know me, but I wanted to tell you that your father was a great man. He...

(she pauses, welling up)

He saved my life. If it weren't for your father I truly believe I wouldn't be standing here today.

She lifts his hands to her lips, kissing them reverently.

AMERICAN WOMAN (CONT'D)

Thank you.

Behind her, more of the workers have gathered. Leila looks around, bewildered, as they start to close in on Tomaso, all wanting a piece of him.

She finds herself marginalized, watching this emotional outpouring. A man with a large facial scar (35) approaches.

## SCARRED MAN

Your father's teachings brought me  
back from the brink. Thank you.

He too lifts Tomaso's hand to his lips and kisses it.

Tomaso is surrounded now by grateful faces. Leila decides to slip away. She catches Tomaso's eye and points upstairs.

Tomaso smiles, letting her go, amused but undeniably moved by this strange reception.

## INT. MAIN HALL DOWNSTAIRS, PALAZZO - LATER

Tomaso's hand is kissed once more as the last of his father's admirers return to their work.

Alone at last, he makes his way to the far end of the hall.

In a secluded, decorated alcove, he finds Myrra's daughter, FRANCESCA (19), leaning over an open coffin.

Francesca is a breathtaking beauty with olive skin and long dark hair. Tomaso is struck by how attractive she is.

## TOMASO

(in Italian)

*Can that really be my little niece  
Francesca?*

Francesca smiles coyly. She is captivating.

## FRANCESCA

(in perfect English)

And I thought you had forgotten me.

She goes back to what she was doing. Papé has been laid out neatly in a simple coffin decorated humbly with verdant ivy. Dressed in a fine suit, the old man looks almost regal.

Francesca is tending to the body, making sure Papé looks his very best. She trims his nails and hair, taking utmost care not to let the clippings fall into the coffin.

Tomaso is moved by the tenderness with which she works.

## TOMASO

You're a good granddaughter.

## FRANCESCA

No. He was a good father. To us all. That's why they were thanking you. He taught us how to live.

Tomaso allows her words to sink in. He looks down at his father and wonders whether perhaps he misjudged him.

INT. TOMASO & LEILA'S BEDROOM - AFTERNOON

Leila is propped up in bed. Through the big glass windows she watches the rain clouds looming over the mountains.

She looks a little pale and shifts uncomfortably as though she cannot find peace in her body.

Tomaso enters and though she tries to hide it, he can tell she is not feeling well.

TOMASO

You still feeling sick?

LEILA

(with wry humor)

My father-in-law just kissed me and then died and now my husband's turning into some kind of Godfather figure. It's a lot.

TOMASO

Did you forget you're also having a baby?

LEILA

Hasn't sunk in yet.

Tomaso adjusts her pillows, stroking her cheek.

TOMASO

Just think, in six months' time, we're going to have a baby. A perfect tiny little baby.

Leila is quick to change the subject.

LEILA

You never told me your father helped so many people. It's incredible.

Tomaso seems to sigh, climbing onto the bed beside her.

TOMASO

He had a knack for spotting broken people.

(MORE)

TOMASO (CONT'D)

He'd invite virtual strangers to stay with us for weeks at a time and he'd talk them through depression, addiction, mourning. He said it was his gift, that he had a duty to share it. After the book came out people would just arrive unannounced and this place turned into some kind of a rehab centre. Once the English translation was published things got out of hand.

LEILA

That's when you left?

TOMASO

Eventually. We had so many foreigners here Papé made us all learn English. Said we needed a universal tongue. Francesca wasn't even allowed to speak Italian as a kid. This place stopped being a home.

(trying to remain unemotional)

People started paying him. Donations supposedly. It didn't feel right. He wasn't qualified. He wasn't a doctor or a psychologist. He was just a rock in a storm full of lost souls. It felt wrong. I didn't want any part of it.

LEILA

I know it doesn't make it any easier but those people down there clearly loved him very much. Seems like he really helped them.

TOMASO

Maybe.

Tomaso puts his hand on her belly. He watches Leila's face, trying to read her.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

You okay? You don't seem excited.

LEILA

Just strange that's all. I thought it was dead. Now it's not.

TOMASO

He's a miracle. Or she.

She stands, moving towards two black dresses hanging up.

LEILA

Which one should I wear tonight?

TOMASO

You sure you're up to it? Dr Rossi said-

LEILA

I'm not going to miss your father's funeral. It's what we came here for isn't it?

Tomaso watches her, concerned, but she doesn't look back. She sits down at a vanity and starts brushing her hair.

LEILA (CONT'D)

Will it be a Catholic mass?

TOMASO

He wasn't religious.

LEILA

I thought all Italians were Catholic.

TOMASO

Not the Argentis.

Tomaso lies back, staring up at the ceiling. Leila considers her reflection in the mirror. Through her sheer top, she can make out the line of her swollen breasts.

The little silver cross still hangs around her neck. She touches it before reaching back and removing it.

INT. STAIRCASE, PALAZZO - NIGHT

Leila and Tomaso stand at the top of the staircase leading down to the main hall. She wears a simple black dress that she adjusts nervously. He wears a cheap suit.

From below they can hear the sound of people chatting and chairs scraping against tile.

Slowly they round the corner, coming into view of the hall where forty or more people mingle round the tables. When they spot Leila and Tomaso, their chatter turns to applause and cheerful cries of "*Auguri!*"

All eyes are on them. Leila is confused, she looks to Tomaso.

LEILA

Did everyone get this reception or  
is it just the latecomers?

TOMASO

(stunned but happy)  
They're saying, "*Auguri*".  
Congratulations. For the baby.

LEILA

I thought we agreed not to tell  
anyone yet.

Dr. Rossi and his wife, DEBORA (36) come bounding up.

DR. ROSSI

Forgive me. Leila. It is not his  
fault. I told my wife the wonderful  
news-

Debora, an exuberant Italian with a mass of dark curly hair,  
grabs Leila's hand and kisses her warmly on the cheek.

DEBORA

(with mock dramatic flair)  
*Colpa mia!*

DR. ROSSI

-and you know women. Truly, Leila,  
I'm sorry. The family needed some  
good news. You understand, no?

Leila has no choice but to accept Dr. Rossi's showy apology.  
Tomaso squeezes her hand, quietly thrilled the news is out.

INT. MAIN HALL DOWNSTAIRS, PALAZZO - LATER THAT EVENING

A magnificent Tuscan dinner is underway and the tables are  
laden with platters of hand-rolled pasta and bottles of wine.

The spirit amongst the mourners is surprisingly jovial and  
much to her surprise, Leila finds herself almost having fun.

Further down the table Leila spots Francesca. She takes in  
the delicate face and the smooth alabaster skin.

When Francesca catches Leila staring, she flashes her a coy  
smile. Leila smiles back, a little embarrassed.

At the head of the table, someone TAPS their glass and a HUSH  
descends on the room as Myrra stands up. She is a natural  
speaker: charismatic and commanding.

MYRRA

*Signore e signori, fratelli e sorelle.* Thank you for being here. Tonight we celebrate the life of a man we all loved.

A chorus of agreement is heard amidst the diners.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

A man who was not just my father, but also your father.

Again the crowd concur warmly.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

A man who took you into this house as his children and who taught us all how to live.

A young boy, PIERO (4) runs between the tables to find Francesca. She lifts him into her lap, drops her dress strap and begins breast-feeding him at the table.

Leila, who has been watching, looks away embarrassed.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

A man whose spirit will never die as long as there are those of us who still believe.

People voice their agreement and support aloud.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

The doors of the Palazzo Argenti shall never close. Like our beloved father, we shall prevail.

Leila steals another glance back at Francesca. The sight of the child suckling at her breast is at once disturbing and beautiful. Francesca catches her looking and holds her gaze.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

Papé's favorite toast was an old Italian one:  
(raising a glass)  
*La morte mi troverà vivo.*

Everyone raises their glasses and toasts to Papé. A handsome Dutchman next to Leila, JUSTIN (20s), leans in to translate.

JUSTIN

"Death shall find me alive"

Myrra continues.

MYRRA

And it seems old Papé was right. In this time of darkness we have new life. New reason to hope.

Myrra looks to Leila and suddenly all eyes are on her. She blushes and looks at Tomaso who is beaming with pride.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

Come Leila. Stand.

Leila is reluctant but before she can stop him, Justin helps her to her feet. Suddenly she is surrounded by a sea of raised glasses and smiling faces. It feels like love.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

To new life! And to the beautiful vessel who shall deliver him. To Leila!

ALL

To Leila!

Leila takes a playful half-curtsey. Eating and chatter resume. Tomaso reaches across to Leila, mouthing silently:

TOMASO

I love you.

He sees the glow in her cheeks, the abundance on the table, and the happy expressive faces all around them.

He watches Myrra moving from one guest to the next, touching shoulders, passing kind words. Each looks up at her with reverence, adoration. Compelled and entranced.

She has slipped seamlessly into the role her father once held. The perfect matriarch.

Teresa walks along the table carrying a hot dish. She ladles a huge portion of deep red RISOTTO onto Leila's plate.

LEILA

(trying out her Italian)  
*Grazie.*

Leila takes a bite of the unctuous rice. She closes her eyes. An involuntary MOAN escapes her. This is a far cry from microwave dinners and Chinese take-out.

LEILA (CONT'D)

(to Tomaso)  
I'm so full but I can't stop eating. What even is this?

TOMASO  
*Che cos'è questo?*

TERESA  
*Riso al sangue.*

Tomaso coughs in surprise and looks at Leila happily eating.

LEILA  
 What? What is it?

TOMASO  
 It's blood risotto.

Leila pauses mid-mouthful. She looks to see if he's joking.

DEBORA  
 It is a traditional recipe. Is very  
 good for you.

Leila is not listening. She struggles to stand up from the long bench. She feels it coming, she can't stop it.

She VOMITS all over her plate, ruining half a dozen dishes of food nearby. It's horrifying.

The room is entirely silent. All eyes on Leila.

LEILA  
 I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Mortified, Leila covers her mouth and runs from the room, with Tomaso hot on her heels and everyone watching.

EXT. PALAZZO BALCONY - DAY

Leila, Tomaso and Dr. Rossi are sitting on the expansive balcony of the palazzo overlooking the mountains.

Though the sun is out, the spring air is crisp and Leila is wrapped up in a blanket against the cold.

Debora is nearby cleaning a bunch of asparagus freshly picked from the garden below.

DR. ROSSI  
 Really Leila, there is nothing to  
 be embarrassed about.

LEILA  
 I feel terrible. The worst thing  
 is, the risotto was delicious.  
 (MORE)

LEILA (CONT'D)

I'm just not used to all this food  
and the morning sickness-

TOMASO

Baby, it's fine. No one minded.  
Right, Debora?

DEBORA

Mind what? After you left we ate a  
lot. We drank a lot. We danced. We  
sing. We remember nothing.

TOMASO

You see. You're fine. You're  
pregnant. You're allowed to throw  
up at funerals.

Leila cringes at the memory. Tomaso nudges her playfully.

DR. ROSSI

These will help you with the  
sickness.

He hands her a pharmacy bottle full of large red capsules.

LEILA

What are they? They look enormous.

DR. ROSSI

Anti-nausea medication. Very mild.  
Perfectly safe for the baby. One a  
day for the next five weeks. That  
should get you through the worst of  
the sickness.

Francesca steps onto the balcony and joins Debora. She bites  
into a tender stalk of asparagus. Leila can't help but watch.

TOMASO

Leila, did you meet my niece,  
Francesca?

Leila, caught looking again, gives an awkward wave.

DR. ROSSI

(interrupting)

Your blood pressure is still a  
little low. We'll keep an eye on it  
but the most important thing is  
rest. I hope you were not planning  
on flying any time soon.

FRANCESCA

(before they can respond)  
 You can't possibly be leaving. You  
 only just arrived. I thought you'd  
 at least stay til summer.

She gets up and puts her arms around Leila and Tomaso with a  
 childlike lack of inhibition.

FRANCESCA (CONT'D)

You must stay. Summer in  
 Castiglione is heaven. Leila, tell  
 him you want to stay.

TOMASO

We'll stay for a while. But we have  
 to get back to New York at some  
 point.

(trying to read Leila's  
 silence)

But we're in no rush. The most  
 important thing is the baby.

Myrra steps out onto the balcony. She's been listening.

MYRRA

Of course they'll stay. Tomaso must  
 help settle the estate.

(in Italian)

*Isn't that why you came?*

Unable to understand Italian, Leila cannot see the tension  
 between these two siblings. Tomaso switches back to English,  
 ignoring Myrra's barbed comment.

TOMASO

I'll help with any paperwork that  
 needs to be done.

Leila turns to him, excited, genuinely supportive.

LEILA

You could finally have some real  
 time to work on your book.

(full of pride)

Tomaso's an incredible writer.

This sparks some interest from Dr Rossi, and as the men begin  
 chatting, Francesca leans in and kisses Leila on the cheek.

FRANCESCA

I'm so happy you're staying. You'll  
 love it here. I promise.

Leila blushes, unsure what to make of this young waif.

MYRRA

You're with family now Leila, your  
only job is to relax and let us  
take care of you.

Myrra takes Leila's hand in hers, it is a maternal gesture.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

You're very precious to us, *carina*.

Leila looks around at the caring faces surrounding her. Her new family. She takes in the incredible setting of this stunning mountain-top palazzo, it's overwhelming.

Smiling politely she excuses herself, stepping inside into the quiet, away from everyone.

Myrra and Francesca look to Tomaso who follows Leila inside, concerned. Did they do something wrong?

INT. PALAZZO ARGENTI

Just inside, Tomaso finds Leila, biting back tears.

TOMASO

Hey, hey, what is it? What  
happened?

He takes her in his arms and Leila lets out a sob that sounds almost like laughter. Tears stream down her face but she's smiling. Tomaso laughs with her, confused.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

You happy?

She nods vigorously into his neck.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

You like it here?

Leila nods again. She takes a deep breath, laughing at her uncharacteristic outpouring of emotion.

LEILA

I never knew what it felt like. To  
be so surrounded by love.

Smiling, she palms the tears from her cheeks.

## SERIES OF IMAGES:

A sequence of images, some time-lapse, others strangely fragmented, play out with an increasingly frenetic pace.

- SNOW on the mountains surrounding Castiglione melts.
- New GROWTH emerges from the hard ground, pushing out pale alien green shoots that bloom under Spring showers.
- Translucent, amphibian-looking FINGERS twitch in the dark. A human hand growing within another human. The steady THUMP of an adult heartbeat alongside the rapid FLUTTER of a foetal heartbeat, like the wings of a trapped moth.
- A large pair of hands come towards us. The hands of a man in his 40s, LEILA'S FATHER.
- The barely discernible features of an embryonic face. The sound of VOICES filters in, muffled and dampened.
- A split-second flash of a WOMAN (40s) in a housedress, holding a knife. Her face is tear-stained. Her lips move but her VOICE is barely heard through the womb-like filter.

## WOMAN

I'm doing this for you.

- NEAR DARKNESS in the womb, the adult heartbeat starts to pick up pace. THUMP, THUMP, THUMP.
- Another split-second flash: HANDS covered in BLOOD. A child's hands.
- The Catholic funeral. Everything moves as if on fast-forward. The lilies adorning the coffin look grotesque, phallic. The priest spews fire and brimstone, flecks of spittle landing on the coffins.
- In the dark, the 16 week old foetus suddenly TWITCHES.

## INT. LEILA &amp; TOMASO'S BEDROOM - MORNING

Leila's eyes flick open. She has felt the baby move.

Several weeks have passed and Leila, now at 16 weeks, is glowing. Right now her cheeks are flushed and as she props herself up on an elbow, her breath comes in fast and shallow.

Almost without waking, Tomaso reaches out to comfort her.

TOMASO

Shhhh... It's okay. I'm here. It's just a dream.

Leila allows herself to flop back onto the pillow. Tomaso's eyes are still closed. He's done this a thousand times.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

Just a bad dream. It's okay. I've got you.

LEILA

I felt it move.

Tomaso's eyes open immediately, excited. He reaches out to touch her stomach but she rolls away from him, slipping her legs out of bed and sitting up.

LEILA (CONT'D)

It's stopped now.

He shuffles across the bed and kisses her now-curved belly.

TOMASO

Good morning baby.

Leila stares out of the window, her breath slowing now.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

Seems like your nightmares are worse than usual.

LEILA

(a little too firm)

I'm fine.

(softening)

I'm sorry. I'm okay. Really.

She squeezes his hand reassuringly, before standing up and pulling her nightie over her head.

Tomaso admires her naked form but she quickly covers up, pulling on underwear and a dress as if embarrassed.

She picks up the pill bottle Dr Rossi gave her. There is only ONE CAPSULE left now and as she shakes it out, it drops and rolls under the bed, LODGING between two floorboards.

Leila is about to get down on all fours to look for it when there is a sharp KNOCK at the door.

Myrra enters without waiting, carrying a breakfast tray for Leila: wild strawberries, creamy yogurt and a cappuccino.

Leila lights up at the sight of breakfast, quickly forgetting the pill. Tomaso looks irritated by the intrusion.

MYRRA

Good morning. Dressed already?

LEILA

(taking a sip of coffee)  
I thought I would go out today. I'm going stir-crazy in here and now that it's finally stopped raining, look how beautiful it is.

MYRRA

You're going out? With who? Where are you going?

LEILA

(laughing)  
With no one. I just thought I would take a walk into the village.  
(pointing out the window)  
Maybe go down to the church.

MYRRA

The church is closed.

LEILA

On a Sunday?

MYRRA

For renovations. The Argenti family are funding the work. We're turning it into a gallery.

TOMASO

And you wonder why the locals hate you so much.

MYRRA

The locals are peasants. They let that place go to ruins. They should be grateful that we're keeping this village alive.

LEILA

I'd like to go down there anyway. Look around.  
(half-joking)  
Is that okay?

MYRRA

Of course. Just be careful. You're still weak.

Leila feels anything but as she breathes in the fresh mountain air.

EXT. VILLAGE CHURCH - DAY

Leila saunters down a steep cobbled street that leads to a piazza in front of the rustic local church.

There is a cement mixer sitting out front alongside a pile of broken pews and crumbling plaster.

The arched oak doors at the front are locked with a HEAVY-DUTY PADLOCK. Leila turns it over in her hand before continuing around the building.

At the back there is a patch of grass dotted with spring flowers and a small back door that gives when Leila tries it.

INT. VILLAGE CHURCH

Inside, the church has been gutted. Motes of dust dance in solitary beams of light. It takes a moment for Leila's eyes to adjust to the dark.

Crumbling frescos have been white washed and stained glass windows boarded up. It barely feels like a church at all and Leila is suddenly unsure of what she's doing here.

Hearing a noise, she quickly genuflects and crosses herself before heading back to the door, almost guiltily.

Just as she's about to open the door, it opens from the outside, startling her.

An OLD WOMAN, wizened and bent with age steps inside, almost on top of Leila, her cheeks hollow over a toothless mouth.

LEILA

I'm so sorry. *Scusi*.

Hearing Leila's accent, the old signora cocks her head, squinting up at her. She grabs Leila firmly by the wrist.

OLD SIGNORA

*L' americana?*

Leila, uncomfortable, tries to move towards the door.

LEILA

*Si. American.*

OLD SIGNORA  
 (muttering venomously)  
*Putana. Putana schifosa.*

The tone of the woman's vitriol scares Leila. She tries to twist her arm free.

LEILA  
 You're hurting me. Please. Let go.

OLD SIGNORA  
*Madre scellerata.*

Leila pulls her hand free and breaks for the door, spilling out into the sunlight.

EXT. VILLAGE CHURCH

Leila tumbles out of the church and falls into the arms of EMMA (30s), a Scottish woman with a plain but kindly face.

EMMA  
 Woah there! You alright sweetheart?

Leila, relieved to be free of the old woman, allows her fear to turn to laughter.

LEILA  
 Yeah. Sorry. There is a crazy old lady in there.

EMMA  
 Ah. You met Zora.

LEILA  
 She scared the shit out of me.

EMMA  
 She's a crazy old cow. Ignore her. I do and she's my aunt.

Leila stops laughing immediately.

LEILA  
 I'm so sorry.

EMMA  
 Don't be. I'm Emma.

Emma's wide grin wins Leila round. She takes her outstretched hand and shakes it warmly.

INT. EMMA'S HOUSE, CASTIGLIONE VILLAGE - DAY

Leila and Emma sit in the cool shade of Emma's modest kitchen, sharing a pot of tea.

The pair are giggling and Leila has a carefree air about her that we have not yet seen.

EMMA

She's half blind, only has four teeth left and she still manages to terrorize everyone she meets. When we were kids my brothers convinced me she was a witch.

LEILA

So you've been coming out here your whole life?

EMMA

Aye. My dad was born here but he emigrated to Scotland to find work. This place was a shit hole back then. But his mum was here. In this house. So when we were young he brought us back every summer. Still a shit hole now. But it's quiet.

Emma looks around the dim little kitchen with a shrug. Leila points to a desk overflowing with papers.

LEILA

You're a writer?

EMMA

That's the idea.

LEILA

My husband's a writer. You should come up to the palazzo, meet him.

EMMA

We don't really mix.  
(off Leila's confused expression)  
The locals and the- your family. You know what it's like. Village politics. The locals don't like the tourists coming in and taking over.

LEILA

Where are all the locals? I've barely seen anyone.

EMMA

Well that's it. There's not many left now. The Argentis bought up a lot of the property in the village.  
(not wanting to complain)  
It's not like people have been leaving empty handed. I've considered selling myself.

LEILA

Is that why your aunt was so angry?

EMMA

No, that was nothing. She's just crazy.  
(off Leila's look)  
Really, it's nothing. Just superstitious old ladies gossiping.

LEILA

About me?

EMMA

It's stupid. Word travels fast here. They heard about your baby coming back from the dead and they spun it into something ridiculous.

LEILA

It didn't come back from the dead. It was a misdiagnosis.

EMMA

Like I said, senile old Catholic ladies with nothing better to talk about.

LEILA

What have they been saying about-?

EMMA

Leila, it doesn't matter. What matters is that you're having a baby! You must be over the moon.

Unsettled, Leila rubs her stomach. The gesture could be protective or wary.

EMMA (CONT'D)

I'm sorry I said anything. Zora's a lunatic. She used to make me eat bars of soap when I took the Lord's name in vein. Whole bars.

Leila is still feeling disturbed. Emma leans across the table and takes Leila's hand reassuringly.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Come on. Your tea's getting cold.

But it's too late. Leila's good mood has been ruined.

EXT. PALAZZO COURTYARD - DAY

Leila wanders slowly back up the steep cobbled streets towards the palazzo, her brow furrowed.

As she nears, she hears the sound of a woman WAILING. It is a strange, guttural cry, like that of an animal in pain.

She hurries her step, rounding the corner to see a police or *carabinieri* car in the courtyard.

People have gathered to watch as a woman, ELENA (30s), is manhandled by a uniformed *carabiniere* into the car.

Leila takes in the scene: Myrra standing stoically in the doorway, Francesca clutching Piero to her chest, crying.

Just as she's about to throw in the car, the woman breaks free. Her eyes fixed on Myrra and Francesca, she grabs at the front of her house-dress and RIPS it open.

Beneath, her skin is pale but for a jagged pink SCAR visible above the line of her underwear.

Unlike a typical caesarean scar, this one has two long incisions that intersect in a cross over her belly.

She drops to her knees, her wails turning to sobs, naked and exposed for everyone to see.

The *carabiniere* lifts her by her arms and this time she does not have the strength to resist as he puts her in the car.

Leila watches as the car slowly pulls out of the courtyard. It is only now that we see Tomaso watching the scene from the other side of the gate.

His gaze is fixed on the weeping woman. They seem to make eye contact for a moment. And then she is gone.

MYRRA (O.C.)

Leila.

Leila and Tomaso both turn to see Myrra in the doorway, her arms open, beckoning Leila to her.

Like a child waking from a bad dream, Leila stumbles over, leaving Tomaso usurped.

EXT. PALAZZO GROUNDS - DAY

Myrra and Leila sit together at a weathered table at the back of the house. Tomaso sits a few seats down, listening. Around them, life has returned to normal.

MYRRA

Her name is Elena. A local woman. Simple. She used to work here, cleaning sheets, helping to take care of Papé.

LEILA

What happened to her?

MYRRA

She lost a child. It drove what little sense she had from her mind. A truly tragic story.

LEILA

Papé couldn't help her?

Tomaso, seems to scoff at this. But he says nothing.

MYRRA

He tried. But he was old. And some people cannot be helped. They do not want to be helped.

Myrra eyes Leila, as if she might be one of these people.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

Tell me, Leila. Do you like it here? With us?

LEILA

I do. I love it here.

MYRRA

Then why do you look sad? There is a sadness in you. We can help you, you know?

Tomaso, who has been rolling his eyes, stands in irritation.

TOMASO

Oh god. You really are turning into him, aren't you?

Myrra is unperturbed. She looks at Tomaso coolly.

MYRRA

Our father taught me that we have a great capacity for love and that we must use that love to help those around us. If that is what you mean, then yes. I hope so.

Tomaso starts to walk away. He pauses for a second, turning to address Leila directly.

TOMASO

Baby, you don't have to listen to this if you don't want to.

He waits for a beat, half-expecting half-hoping Leila will join him but she is too embarrassed to walk away from Myrra.

As soon as he is out of earshot, Myrra sighs, sadly.

MYRRA

He carries great anger. It will eat him if he's not careful.  
(taking Leila's hand)  
Come, walk with me.

EXT. PALAZZO GROUNDS - DAY

There are a dozen or so people, most of whom we have seen before, working the vegetable patch, cutting the grass, hanging laundry. Myrra sweeps her arms in front of her.

MYRRA

All these people. Why do you think they are here?  
(before Leila can answer)  
They are here because they have found a better way to live. That is the gift that Papé gave them.

LEILA

This place?

MYRRA

A philosophy for life. A way to find pleasure and freedom in a world that so often tries to suppress that.

They walk on arm in arm through the fertile grounds of the palazzo. They pass Francesca and Justin tying young raspberry plants. Their body language is flirtatious.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

The way of life that Papé proposes in his first book is not some new fad or revolution. His philosophy harks back to our roots: it's a way of life that keeps the cycle pure. That is the meaning of the ouroboros.

She shows Leila a delicate tattoo on the inside of her forearm. Several others have them too. It's the symbol from the front of Papé's book: the snake swallowing its tail.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

We till the land and eat its fruits, we drink wine from grapes we have grown, eat meat that we have reared or hunted and give up the anchors and distractions that modern life has imposed upon us. It is the way of our ancestors.

In this rural idyll it's hard not to be won over.

Myrra stops, taking Leila's arm. She looks into her eyes.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

I see you Leila and you are lost. You are a broken soul, desperately looking to be healed.

LEILA

(flustered)

I don't-

MYRRA

We can help you Leila. Papé can help you.

Myrra hands Leila a well-read copy of Papé's book.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

But only if you're ready to be helped.

Leila stares at the book, the ouroboros embossed on its cover in a golden ring.

INT. LEILA & TOMASO'S BEDROOM, PALAZZO - NIGHT

The book is now in Leila's hands as she reads it, sitting up in bed. Tomaso comes in from the bathroom.

TOMASO

You've had your head stuck in that book for days. I don't understand why you're reading it.

LEILA

Listen, if it bothers you so much, I won't read it. But it's actually really interesting. It makes a lot of sense. Myrra says-

TOMASO

Please. Myrra's just a clone of Papé. I hate it when she does that "looking-into-your-soul" thing. Like she's so fucking wise.

Leila doesn't respond but Tomaso's vitriol has offended her. It feels like they are no longer on the same team.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. It's my problem. Read it if you want.

Suddenly, Leila winces. Her hand shoots to her belly.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

Is it the baby? Is he kicking?

He rushes over and puts both hands on Leila's stomach. She almost grimaces. Tomaso's face lights up.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

I think I felt it. He's responding to my voice.

He puts his ear to her belly, unable to see Leila's frozen expression. She does not share his excitement.

After a moment, she speaks. Eyes glazed, voice distant.

LEILA

Do you know the local women think it's the devil's work? Our baby, coming back from the dead.

But Tomaso is listening intently to her stomach, muttering quietly into her belly, "talking" to the baby.

LEILA (CONT'D)

(barely a whisper)  
I'm scared Tommy.

A tear rolls down her cheek. She could not feel more alone.

INT. KITCHEN, PALAZZO - EARLY MORNING

It is not long after dawn and the palazzo is still quiet. Myrra is at the table going over papers when Leila enters.

She clutches a copy of Papé's book, its pages now marked with scraps of paper. She approaches Myrra tentatively.

LEILA

I think I'm ready.

Myrra looks up at her. Leila looks tired, vulnerable. Myrra reaches out and takes her hand, smiling.

MYRRA (PRE-LAP)

Papé's first book teaches us that the first step to purity is to cleanse the soul. It is a ritual we call "Purgation".

Myrra's voice guides us seamlessly through the ensuing sequence, overlapping between scenes, overriding all space for thought.

INT. STAIRCASE TO THE PALAZZO BASEMENT - DAY

Myrra leads Leila slowly down a long staircase leading below ground level. Leila wears only a robe. She seems nervous.

MYRRA (V.O.)

It is only by opening up and clearing away the bad thoughts and memories of our past that we can find true happiness in the present. Guilt is a modern notion. As is stress. Anxiety. Inhibition. It is not until we are able to wash ourselves clean of these tensions, these negative emotions, that we can start to love ourselves and find pleasure in our purity.

INT. STUDY, PALAZZO - DAY

Myrra and Leila are alone in a quiet room in the palazzo. Leila has both palms flat on a small table while Myrra sits opposite, taking notes.

MYRRA

You must be open with me, Leila, or you will not find peace.

INT. STAIRCASE TO THE PALAZZO BASEMENT - CONTINUOUS

Leila and Myrra continue their descent.

MYRRA (V.O.)  
When did your parents die?

We hear Leila's voice, it sounds distant, as we watch her face, pale and nervous and still.

LEILA (V.O.)  
When I was 8 years old.

MYRRA (V.O.)  
How did you feel when they died?

CUT TO:

A SPLIT-SECOND FLASH to those hands. Bloody. Young Leila standing in a white nightie, covered in blood.

BACK TO:

INT. STUDY, PALAZZO - CONTINUOUS

Leila looks confused, dazed. Myrra presses on, emotionless.

MYRRA  
Were you sad? Or angry?

LEILA  
Angry.

MYRRA  
With your mother?

LEILA  
Yes.

MYRRA  
Because she killed your father?

CUT TO:

The woman in the housedress, LEILA'S MOTHER, holding a blood-stained knife. Her lips move but there is no sound.

BACK TO:

LEILA  
Yes.

MYRRA  
Why did she kill him?

LEILA  
(uncomfortable)  
I don't know. She was crazy.

Leila starts to shift in her chair. She is about to raise one hand from the table when Myrra fixes her with a look.

LEILA (CONT'D)  
She was jealous. My father loved me more than her.

CUT TO:

HANDS, reaching out to her. Her father's hands. Strong.

BACK TO:

EXT. PALAZZO GROUNDS - DAY

The raspberry plants have grown since we last saw them. Leila weeds around them, the berries still tight and green.

Through the leafy plants, she sees Francesca's eye, her lips. Francesca breaks into a smile, bright and beautiful.

Throughout, we continue to hear Myrra and Leila's session.

MYRRA (V.O.)  
Did you hate her for that?

LEILA (V.O.)  
Yes.

MYRRA (V.O.)  
Do you still hate her?

LEILA (V.O.)  
She's dead-

MYRRA (V.O.)  
Do you still hate her?

LEILA (V.O.)  
Yes.

INT. STAIRCASE TO THE PALAZZO BASEMENT - CONTINUOUS

Leila and Myrra have reached the bottom of the long staircase. There is a small DOOR that Myrra opens slowly.

CUT TO:

Young Leila arrives at the funeral. A DOOR OPENS and she walks up aisle towards two coffins. Everyone stares.

BACK TO:

Steam billows out as the DOOR OPENS and we see that it is a brick-lined sauna of sorts. There are already a dozen people inside, barely visible through the steam.

Myrra gestures for Leila to enter.

MYRRA

Heat will help to cleanse you.

(when Leila hesitates)

It is perfectly safe. The doctor is here.

CUT TO:

A SPLIT-SECOND FLASH of adult Leila in a white dress on a wide staircase. Her face is pale as CRIMSON BLOOD blooms on her dress. Her hands are covered in blood.

BACK TO:

INT. STUDY, PALAZZO - DUSK

Leila looks tired, the long shadows tell us that she and Myrra have been at this for hours.

Now her voice is flat, droning, as though in a trance.

LEILA

I love him because he is a good person.

MYRRA

And do you believe you are a good person?

LEILA

No.

INT. KITCHEN, PALAZZO - EVENING

Leila and Tomaso sit opposite one another at the long dining table. Around them people are eating and drinking.

They do not speak. Tomaso watches Leila pick at her food. There is a gulf growing between them.

MYRRA (V.O.)  
Do you believe you are bad?

LEILA (V.O.)  
Yes.

MYRRA (V.O.)  
Why are you bad?

Myrra touches Leila's shoulder, joining them at the table. Tomaso notices how Leila's face lights up.

CUT TO:

An almost abstract image of a DEVELOPING FOETUS. Large birdlike eyes, webbed fingers. It stirs in the darkness.

BACK TO:

INT. PALAZZO BASEMENT - CONTINUOUS

Leila is inside the steam room. Others sit around the room, some naked, others in robes. Myrra helps Leila out of her robe. She wears only her underwear and a simple camisole.

Dr Rossi is there. He hands Leila a small glass of murky tea.

DR. ROSSI  
Drink. It will help you to see.

Leila looks nervous, but not afraid, as she takes a sip and closes her eyes.

LEILA (V.O.)  
Because I wished for my baby to be dead.

INT. STUDY, PALAZZO - CONTINUOUS

Leila, wide-eyed, exhausted, still has her palms pressed into the table's surface. Her fingers are white. It is almost dark now in the room. The sun has set.

LEILA  
 Because I hate the life growing  
 inside me.

Myrra keeps her gaze, without judgement, as the emotions  
 begin pouring out of Leila unbound.

LEILA (CONT'D)  
 I feel it moving, inside me, this  
 thing. It disgusts me.

Tears begin to slip down her face but she doesn't blink.

LEILA (CONT'D)  
 I know I should love it. I know I  
 should feel proud. But I don't. I  
 am trapped in my own body. It has  
 taken me over. I prayed to God it  
 would die but then it came back.

CUT TO:

A FLASH of that embryonic life form. Its misproportioned head  
 and limbs, moving in the liquid darkness of the womb.

Now there is the loud, steady, THUMP-THUMP of Leila's heart  
 and the almost deafening FLUTTER of the foetal heartbeat.

The percussive beat carries on as:

BACK TO:

Tears and snot slide down Leila's face but still she doesn't  
 lift her hands from the table.

LEILA (CONT'D) MYRRA  
 I don't want it. I don't want it. Why Leila?

LEILA (CONT'D)  
 I don't want to be a mother.

MYRRA  
 Why not Leila?

LEILA  
 (exploding)  
 Because I'm scared. I'm scared that  
 I'll turn out just like her.

The sounds of her sobbing carry us through:

CUT TO:

INT. LEILA & TOMASO'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Leila and Tomaso lie in bed, side by side but not touching. Leila stares out the window until finally her eyes close.

Behind her, Tomaso stares at the back of her head, feeling impossibly distant from her even as they lie together.

BACK TO:

INT. PALAZZO BASEMENT - CONTINUOUS

Leila is surrounded by steam. Sweat trickles from her forehead, dripping down her neck and into her cleavage.

Her camisole is drenched, clinging to her. The glass of tea is empty. She lets it roll from her hand. Eyes closed.

CUT TO:

SERIES OF IMAGES:

The images come to her now, cacophonous, colliding, spilling quickly from one to the next in an overwhelming wave.

- Her father's hands reaching out to her.
- The embryonic hands inside of her.
- The kind comforting hands coming out of the steam, holding her, supporting her.
- Her own hands pressed hard into the surface of the table.
- Her mother's bloody hands, clutching the knife.
- The steamy room, faces barely visible, her vision blurry.
- A door opening, light spilling into a darkened bedroom. A FIGURE in the doorway: a MAN in silhouette.
- Her father's hands, reaching out to her.
- The figure in the doorway approaching us. Stepping closer to our POV, in the bed.
- Her father's hands reaching out, pulling back the covers, menacing now. Predatory.

- The silhouette of a woman in the doorway, looking in, seeing with horror what is happening inside. She SCREAMS.

BACK TO:

Leila, in the middle of the steamy room, retches and THROWS UP onto the floor. Purging her body.

Heaving, on all fours, a dozen kind hands reach out to help her. Holding back her hair, reaching out of the steam, stroking her face, cradling her.

Leila is laughing now, crying and delirious. Her hair drenched and plastered to her face as she laughs and cries uncontrollably with the weight of realization.

LEILA

She was protecting me. She was protecting me.

(cradling her stomach)

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

She smiles through her tears, utterly vulnerable, as if newborn. Her whole world has changed.

A high-window is opened and as the steam rushes out, daylight pours in. Leila is laid flat on her back to rest.

She takes deep lungfuls of fresh air and looks up at Myrra, spent, grateful.

MYRRA

Do you feel that? Now you can see.

(off Leila's nod)

You are clean. You are ready.

Myrra strokes her hair, maternal, proud.

EXT. PALAZZO GROUNDS - DAY

It is a stunning summer's day. The landscape surrounding the palazzo is verdant and beautiful.

Leila looks like a different person as she plucks ripe red raspberries with Emma and Francesca. She seems happy, carefree, sun-kissed.

At 26 weeks her bump is now pronounced and she is careful to protect it with one hand as she reaches for the fruit.

Tomaso appears at the back door. He pauses there, admiring the change in Leila. He can't get over it.

Leila spots him and saunters over, a bowl of berries in her hand. She places one between his lips before kissing him.

Tomaso kisses her back, aware that there are other people around. He pulls back but his hands stay on her hips. He looks at her quizzically.

LEILA

What?

TOMASO

You're so...different.

LEILA

I'm happy.

TOMASO

I can tell. I'm happy you're happy.  
I thought I was losing you for a  
minute.

LEILA

I'm finally ready to be a mother.  
I'm clean now.

The smile drops from Tomaso's face.

TOMASO

Please don't talk like that.  
Whatever Myrra's telling you, I'm  
pleased it's made you feel better,  
but don't let her put words in your  
mouth.

LEILA

She told me nothing. She just  
allowed me to see the truth.

Leila's peaceful tone grates with Tomaso. She reaches out, trying to bridge the increasingly apparent gap between them.

LEILA (CONT'D)

If you read the book, maybe you'd  
see. Maybe you'd understand.

TOMASO

Understand what?

LEILA

Me?

This hits Tomaso hard. It hurts. Leila tries another tack.

LEILA (CONT'D)  
Purgation might help you. Maybe  
your writing would-

Tomaso cuts her off, imploring.

TOMASO  
What are you even saying? Listen to  
yourself, Leila.

When Leila fails to respond, he turns sadly and walks away.

Leila watches him go wondering whether it is she who has  
changed or him.

INT. PALAZZO, UPSTAIRS - DAY

Tomaso sits at a desk, surrounded by papers. Outside Leila  
has gone back to the raspberry plants with Emma and  
Francesca.

MYRRA (O.C.)  
It's wonderful to see her happy no?

Myrra's sudden appearance at the door makes Tomaso jump.

MYRRA (CONT'D)  
How's the writing going?

TOMASO  
(barely veiled irritation)  
I haven't been writing. I've been  
trying to sort through this  
paperwork. The tax returns make no  
sense. You have money coming in  
from people I've never even heard  
of. And you seem to have an  
unending stream of people living  
here rent-free.

MYRRA  
What would you have me do Tomaso?  
Turn them away?  
(off Tomaso's look)  
Why is it so hard for you to  
imagine that what we do here is  
real? Our father was a visionary-

Tomaso laughs bitterly, shaking his head.

MYRRA (CONT'D)  
Did you really hate him so much?

TOMASO

I spent my childhood being passed from one stranger to another. He was always offering his "insight" into someone else's life but he was blind when it came to his own son. I hated growing up here.

He appeals to his sister, kinder now.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

Don't you ever want to leave this place? Live in a city, see the world?

MYRRA

Why would I leave? We have everything we need right here.

Tomaso can see that he's not getting through to her.

TOMASO

As soon as I have the estate in order, Leila and I are going back to New York.

MYRRA

Now who is the blind one?

Tomaso follows Myrra's gaze outside, where Leila can be seen laughing and chatting in this pastoral paradise.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

Why don't you ask Leila what she wants for once.

Myrra turns and leaves Tomaso alone to stew.

INT. LEILA & TOMASO'S BATHROOM - NIGHT

In the soft steamy light of a few candles, Leila soaks in the marble bathtub. The doors leading to a tiny balcony are wide, revealing a star-filled night sky.

In the warm water, something STIRS inside Leila's belly. An elbow, or a knee, pushes out against her skin, visibly moving inside her. It is both magical and revolting, like watching a trapped eel writhe in a net.

Leila waits for the movement to pass before closing her eyes.

Suddenly, the silence is broken. Leila's eyes flick open.

From outside, the unmistakable sounds of people fucking.

Leila's face breaks into a smile. But amusement soon gives way to curiosity.

She lifts herself from the tub and slips on a robe as she pads over to the balcony.

She peers around and sees Francesca, bent over the railings of the adjacent balcony, being taken from behind.

Leila snaps her head back and stifles a shocked laugh. She stands pressed against the shutters for a moment. Finally, she dares another look.

Lit from behind, Francesca's skin seems luminous. Her hair hangs over her face, her eyes closed as she sways under the rhythms of her unseen lover.

But as Leila keeps watching, unable to look away, she notices not one but TWO PAIRS of hands caressing Francesca's body.

Aroused, disturbed, excited, Leila is fixated as Francesca draws towards climax.

Just before Francesca comes, she opens her eyes and sees Leila watching her.

Francesca does not stop. She looks directly at Leila, who remains frozen under her gaze, before closing her eyes and succumbing to orgasm.

As if the spell were suddenly broken, Leila pulls back into her bathroom, flushed and breathing heavily.

INT. LEILA & TOMASO'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Tomaso is already in bed with the lights off as Leila tiptoes in from the bathroom. She drops her robe and slides into bed.

Her heart still pounding, she reaches under the sheets, seeking out Tomaso's body.

Without turning, Tomaso sleepily takes her hand in his and wraps it around his chest.

Hurt and rejected, Leila rolls away from him. After a moment, Tomaso turns over puts his arm around Leila's belly.

Leila lies rigidly beneath his arm as he slips back to sleep.

INT. KITCHEN, PALAZZO - NIGHT

The palazzo is dark and quiet. Leila sits in her robe eating pecorino and grapes in the light of a solitary lamp.

Her interaction with Tomaso has left her angry, frustrated. She eyes a rustic homemade chianti bottle, tempted.

Behind her, the fridge door suddenly opens, startling her.

FRANCESCA

Thirsty?

Francesca has pulled on a skimpy tank and a pair of white panties but her tan skin and hair are still damp with sweat. She doesn't show the slightest flicker of embarrassment.

FRANCESCA (CONT'D)

In Italy we all drink when we're pregnant. It's about moderation.

Francesca grabs two small stemless glasses and puts them before Leila to fill. She pops a piece of cheese in her mouth and hops up onto the stool beside Leila. They CLINK glasses.

FRANCESCA (CONT'D)

I guess I'm not the only one who gets hungry after sex.

(off Leila's look)

What? You guys didn't..?

Leila squirms for a moment, awkward. Francesca is so bold, shameless, that eventually Leila opens up.

LEILA

(gesturing to her belly)

Tomaso doesn't think it's right.

FRANCESCA

That's ridiculous. Now is when you need it most.

Leila makes a face as if to say, you don't need to tell me.

FRANCESCA (CONT'D)

And now is when you're most sexy.

LEILA

I don't know about that. I feel like a whale. I'm enormous.

FRANCESCA

You're beautiful. And if Tomaso can't see that he's a fool.

Francesca places her hand on Leila's stomach. She strokes the soft curves of her belly and very slowly, she LOOSENS Leila's robe, pushing it open.

Leila is exposed and entranced. Her embarrassment soon outweighed by desire, she is unable to stop this confident young woman whose hands begin to explore her body.

LEILA  
Francesca, I -

FRANCESCA  
Did you like watching me?

Leila's breath catches. She wants to deny it but she can't.

LEILA  
Yes.

Francesca's hands move up to caress Leila's breasts.

She slips silently off her stool and pushes Leila's legs apart. She stands between her legs, inches away.

LEILA (CONT'D)  
(breathless)  
Who was it?

FRANCESCA  
It doesn't matter. We all belong to each other.

She leans in and kisses Leila softly on the mouth.

FRANCESCA (CONT'D)  
I'm yours.

She pauses, her tongue tracing the curve of Leila's lip.

FRANCESCA (CONT'D)  
And you're mine.

Her hand reaches down to touch Leila. Leila's eyes go wide as a gasp escapes her.

This is a line Leila knows she shouldn't cross but as Francesca presses into her, she closes her eyes and succumbs.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Rough, wet, breath. Grunting. Hooves, running, the sound of an animal being pursued.

PREY'S POV:

We see flashes of leaves, tree roots, all at great speed as a young WILD BOAR, runs for its life.

All around, the sound of dogs BARKING. Men, crashing through the undergrowth, hooting and hollering with excitement as they close in on the animal, surrounding it.

Then the SNARLING of dogs, the sound of flesh being RIPPED as the world turns UPSIDE DOWN and all we see is blue sky through the treetops.

INT. KITCHEN, PALAZZO - DAY

The carcass of the wild boar hangs in the kitchen, flies buzzing lazily around it.

It's a hot summer's day and the air in the kitchen is close. Francesca and Leila sit opposite each other at the long table, prepping an elaborate meal with half a dozen others.

Justin chops the head clean off a freshly slaughtered rabbit. No one, including Leila, so much as flinches as the carcass is skinned and quartered.

Teresa begins hacking the animal into smaller pieces. Debora uses a MEAT MALLET to pound the thigh meat into flat fillets.

The fresh OFFAL is passed up the line to Leila.

Leila's movements are languid, assured, as she coats the liver, heart and kidneys in flour and passes them down to Myrra who slides them into a pan of sizzling butter and sage.

After mere minutes in the pan, the hot offal is tipped onto a plate with a squeeze of lemon and offered up to Leila.

Debora reaches out to grab a piece but Teresa swats her away. Leila comes first. She is a queen here and she likes it.

She picks up a heart between her fingers. It is RARE and BLOODY. She pops it in her mouth just as Tomaso walks in carrying a file of papers.

Leila's mood visibly cools. There is still a tension between them and added to that now is Leila's guilt.

She goes back to work flouring more fresh offal as Tomaso squeezes himself in next to her, disrupting the line.

TOMASO

Are you sure you won't come?

He reaches out and wipes flour from her face, tenderly. He's trying hard to make things better.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

You've never seen Lucca. It's a beautiful city.

LEILA

I'm happy here. We're going to make wild boar sausage and we're roasting the rabbits for dinner.

TOMASO

It'll be good for you to get out. You've barely left the village since we got here. Come with me.  
(really trying)  
Carlo's lending me his car.

LEILA

Why would I leave? We have everything we need right here.

At the stove, Myrra smiles to hear her words in Leila's mouth. Tomaso's not ready to give up. He turns to the others:

TOMASO

Could we have a minute?

No one moves until Myrra gives them a NOD. The line scatters into the adjoining rooms. Tomaso keeps his voice low.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

Baby, I'm sorry about the other night. Why don't you come with me? I won't be long at the Civil Office and then we can spend the day together.  
(wrapping an arm around her, smiling)  
Just the three of us.

Leila does not respond. She continues to toy with the still-warm entrails of the third rabbit.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

Could you stop that? It's disgusting.  
(immediately regretting his outburst)  
I miss being alone with you. I feel like we're always surrounded by other people.

LEILA

These people are my family now.

TOMASO

No. They're not. Some of them are my family. The rest are freeloaders and losers looking for answers from some stupid fucking book my father wrote 30 years ago.

In the face of Tomaso's rant, Leila seems like the reasonable one.

LEILA

These negative emotions are going to kill you Tomaso. You need to let them go, you need to be-

TOMASO

Stop it. That's it. As soon as I've tied up this paperwork we're going home.

He stands and moves towards the door. Leila remains calm.

LEILA

What if I don't want to go home?

Tomaso walks out on her, slamming the door behind him.

Alone now, Leila's cool veneer cracks. She hates what is happening to them.

EXT. PALAZZO - DAY

On the other side of the door, Tomaso is already regretting his tone. He hesitates for a moment, wanting to go back in, apologize. But pride pushes him away and he leaves.

EXT. LUCCA - DAY

An hour's drive away, the city of Lucca is magnificent and picturesque. Trees and houses straddle the thick walls that surround the old city.

Tomaso arrives, driving through one of the walls' gates, during the hottest hours of the afternoon.

INT. CIVIL OFFICE, LUCCA - DAY

The air inside the cramped civil office is thick and the harried workers sweat into their thin cotton shirts.

[The ensuing italicized conversation takes place in Italian, with subtitles.]

CLERK  
*Argenti, Tomaso?*

Tomaso stands impatiently and leans over the counter to talk to yet another city official. He's been here for some time.

CLERK (CONT'D)  
*My colleague tells me you are looking for a death certificate.*

TOMASO  
*Yes. My father recently passed and I need to the documentation to show that my sister and I are the next of kin.*

CLERK  
*Your father?*

Tomaso speaks slowly. It's clear he's been through this several times already.

TOMASO  
*Yes. But I'm looking for a death certificate for Maria Argenti - his wife, my mother. For some reason it's taking you people all day.*

CLERK  
*I'm sorry sir but as I understand it, the reason for the delay is that we don't have such a document.*

TOMASO  
*Well can you get a copy?*

CLERK  
*No sir.*

TOMASO  
(exasperated)  
*Well where can I get one?*

CLERK

*Sir, I'm afraid that the woman you are looking for is not dead so it will not be possible to obtain such a thing.*

TOMASO

*You're mistaken. Her name is Maria Antonella Argenti, born July 26, 1949. She died giving birth to me on December-*

CLERK

*No, I'm afraid you are mistaken. Maria Argenti, born Maria Bonini in 1949, is still alive and filing taxes here in Lucca.*

The clerk points to a piece of paper before him, dated recently and bearing a name and address for the woman who until now Tomaso believed to be long dead.

TOMASO

*She's alive?*

EXT. OUTSIDE CASTIGLIONE'S WALLS - LATE AFTERNOON

The land on the other side of the thick medieval walls encompassing the village cascades down in a series of steep vine-covered terraces.

Leila sits with her back to the wall, looking down the hillside, Emma beside her.

LEILA

*Maybe he's right. This is the first time I've stepped outside of the village in weeks.*

EMMA

*(making excuses, kind)*  
*You've not been well.*

A few terraces down, Emma's aunt Zora cuts at the grass with a RUSTY SCYTHE. Bent double, she glances up at them with a look of disapproval and quickly CROSSES herself.

Leila barely seems to notice. She stares into the distance.

LEILA

*It's funny. I can't tell if it's him who's changed or me. He used to be my whole world, and I was his.*

(MORE)

LEILA (CONT'D)

But since I got pregnant... It's like he doesn't see me anymore.

MYRRA (O.C.)

Leila?

Above Leila's head, a round PORTHOLE, about two feet in diameter, cuts through the thick stone wall. Peering through from the other side, Myrra's face. Leila calls up to her.

LEILA

Here.

Myrra vanishes, heading for the gate nearby. Emma stands, quickly, dusting the grass from her skirt. She seems nervous.

EMMA

I should go, help my aunt.  
(before Leila can protest)  
Come by and see me sometime.

Emma hurries down the terraces and out of sight just as Myrra rounds the corner.

MYRRA

What on earth are you doing out here? You missed Purgation.

LEILA

I needed some time alone.  
(explaining)  
Tomaso thinks we should leave.

MYRRA

Tomaso is being selfish, as always.

Leila is taken aback by Myrra's tone.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

We don't need him. He can leave if he wants. The family will take care of the child. Money's been coming in for months now.

LEILA

I don't want Tomaso to leave. I think I've been unfair on him. I just got so caught up in this place. You've all been so kind to me. And *you*, you've taught me so much, but maybe he's right. Maybe it's time to go back.

Myrra's demeanor changes quite suddenly.

MYRRA

Leaving is out of the question.

LEILA

(shocked, almost laughing)  
Myrra, I appreciate everything  
you've done for me but-

MYRRA

The baby will be born here. He  
belongs with us.

LEILA

(confused, frightened)  
What are you talking about?

MYRRA

Papé's second book was never  
finished. In it, he promises the  
keys to eternal life. That he who  
is truly pure may ascend and be  
reincarnated to live again.

(gesturing to Leila's  
belly)

With his return, Papé proves that  
everything he taught us was true.  
The family will be stronger than  
ever.

Leila, on her feet now, backs away from Myrra.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

The baby belongs to us Leila. You  
are The Vessel. Papé is inside you  
and you shall deliver him to us.

LEILA

You don't know what you're saying.

MYRRA

Your baby died. Just like you  
wanted. And it made way for him.  
Don't you feel it?

Horrified, Leila clings to the wall for support. Myrra  
watches, unmoving, as Leila turns and hurries away.

EXT. MARIA ARGENTI'S APARTMENT, LUCCA - DUSK

Tomaso arrives at a rundown apartment complex in the  
industrial outskirts of Lucca. The concrete balconies are  
crowded with greying laundry and old men smoking.

## I/E. MARIA ARGENTI'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

He rings the buzzer of a second floor apartment. The name scrawled on the bell reads "M.Argenti".

After a few agonizing moments, he hears a shuffling inside, the sound of a CAT scramming. A woman in her sixties, her face hardened and lined by life, answers the door.

[The ensuing italicized conversation takes place in Italian, with subtitles.]

MARIA

*What do you want?*

TOMASO

*Maria Argenti?*

She concedes to the name with a small nod of the head, suspicious of this nervous man sweating on her doorstep.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

*Maria Antonella Argenti?*

MARIA

*Who are you?*

TOMASO

*I think -*  
 (trepidation tinged with  
 excitement)  
*I'm your son.*  
 (persevering)  
*They told me you died in labor. My  
 father, Filippo Argenti-*

She doesn't wait to hear him out.

MARIA

*I never had a son.*

She pushes the door closed but he stops her.

TOMASO

*No, wait. Please. I just want to  
 talk to you.*

On the inside of her forearm, he notices a pale round scar: a burn where once there was a tattoo.

MARIA

*I don't want anything to do with  
 you people.*

TOMASO

*Please. I just need to know if -*

MARIA

*I'm telling you. I never had a son.*

TOMASO

*But you had a daughter, Myrra.*

MARIA

*(spitting in contempt)*

*I gave birth to her but she is no daughter of mine. She is sick. Sick and ungodly. Like her father.*

Maria crosses herself at the memory and tries again to close the door. Tomaso is getting increasingly desperate.

TOMASO

*He's dead. Please, I just want to know my mother -*

MARIA

*If you want to know who your mother is why don't you ask that whore "sister" of yours.*

Tomaso, stunned, takes his foot from the door.

Seizing her opportunity Maria SLAMS it closed and turns the locks, leaving Tomaso reeling.

EXT. CASTIGLIONE - NIGHT

Tomaso drives up the narrow winding road with reckless speed.

His knuckles are white as he clutches the steering wheel, tearing through the open gates of the village and screeching to a halt outside the palazzo courtyard.

INT. LEILA & TOMASO'S BEDROOM, PALAZZO - NIGHT

Leila's SUITCASE is on the bed as she frantically gathers her and Tomaso's belongings. She is flustered, upset. She barely notices the sound of the CAR outside.

As she tosses her toiletries into the open case, she drops a lipstick, which rolls under the bed.

From downstairs, the muffled sound of RAISED VOICES.

INT. MAIN ROOM DOWNSTAIRS, PALAZZO - NIGHT

Myrra, stripped of make-up and wearing only a nightie. He is wild with emotion.

TOMASO

Tell me you're not my mother.

Myrra does not respond. Her face is hard.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

Who is my father? One of Papé's charity cases? Who?

INT. LEILA & TOMASO'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Lowering herself carefully onto all fours, Leila reaches a hand into the dark space under the bed.

Her fingers catch something. The last RED CAPSULE that Dr Rossi gave her all those months ago.

She pulls it free and as she does it CRACKS OPEN, spilling its contents. But where the medication should be, Leila finds CLIPPINGS of HAIR and of old, yellowed FINGERNAILS.

Leila dry-retchers in revulsion as the sound of Tomaso's voice grows LOUDER.

INT. PALAZZO ARGENTI, DOWNSTAIRS - NIGHT

Myrra seems to toy with Tomaso.

MYRRA

You know who your father is. The same as your sister's.

TOMASO

Francesca?

MYRRA

Your father is her father. And he too is mine.

(as his face blanches)

Come on, Tomaso. Don't pretend you didn't know.

Myrra seems to be enjoying herself. Tomaso stumbles back.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

You always knew. Deep down. That's why you left when Francesca was born. Because you knew the truth.

Tomaso is collapsing in on himself. The weight of Myrra's words crushing him.

TOMASO

No. No. No no no no. Stop. Please.

MYRRA

You were the son he always wanted. Pure of blood. You were the embodiment of everything we stand for. Flesh of his flesh, blood of his blood. We made you pure.

Tomaso drops to his knees, his face a paroxysm of horror.

INT. STAIRCASE TO THE MAIN HALL, PALAZZO - NIGHT

Leila moves towards the staircase, dazed. In her hand, the crushed red pill with its vile contents.

From downstairs, she can hear Tomaso SOBBING. She tries to call out to him but her voice is trembling, faint.

LEILA

Tomaso?

Her bare feet pad down the first couple of steps. She holds onto the banister for support. Her face is pale and clammy.

INT. MAIN ROOM DOWNSTAIRS, PALAZZO - NIGHT

Francesca and Piero emerge sleepily from their ground floor bedroom. Tomaso is at Myrra's feet, his body wracked by sobs.

Suddenly Piero points up at the staircase. Francesca lets out a piercing SCREAM.

Leila stands half-way up the stairs, her face deathly pale. CRIMSON BLOOD blooms over the white fabric of her dress.

LEILA

(as if in a trance)

Tommy? I want to go home now.

LEILA'S POV:

As she starts to SWAY, Leila sees Tomaso look up. As her hearing goes, our world is MUTED. She sees everyone looking up at her, their eyes filled with fear.

Myrra rushes towards her as her legs buckle and we:

FADE TO BLACK.

SERIES OF IMAGES (LEILA'S POV):

The world remains MUTED as a series of images FADE IN, chaotic, colliding, flashing before us in seeming rhythm with Leila's pounding HEARTBEAT. Behind it, the flutter of the foetal heartbeat.

- Disembodied hands reach out to Leila from the steam. Supportive, smothering.
- Bloody hands: Young Leila's, her mother's, her own.
- Hands lifting her onto a gurney. The fluorescent lights of a hospital corridor.
- Tomaso, throwing himself towards her, desperately reaching for her, veins popping in his neck. Hands holding him back.
- Hands touching skin. Francesca's skin. Four hands running over her. Francesca's hand on Leila's smooth round belly.
- Leila's father's face, looming over her, in the darkness.
- A hospital room. Dr Rossi, looking down at her, INJECTING something (a sedative) into an IV in her arm.
- Looking down at Papé as he suddenly reaches up, grabs her. Those sick, wet, bony gums closing in.
- A bag of BLOOD being hooked up to an IV. The slow trickle of dark viscose liquid going into her veins.

Leila's HEARTBEAT begins to slow, slow, slow. It regulates, accompanied as always by the foetal heartbeat. Slower now we see a series of people standing vigil by Leila's bedside.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Her POV remains groggy: Myrra, Debora, Francesca, Teresa. Each in turn, watching, waiting. But no Tomaso.

END POV.

Leila remains hooked up to the IV. She looks pale and weak. Myrra sits by her bedside, eyes fixed to the foetal monitor.

Leila's eyelids flutter OPEN. She struggles to focus.

LEILA  
Tomaso... Tomaso?

Myrra looks down at her, impassive. She presses a BUTTON on an automated IV and within seconds, Leila begins slipping back into UNCONSCIOUSNESS, Tomaso's name on her lips.

INT. PSYCHIATRIC WARD, HOSPITAL - DAY

In a remote, isolated ward that feels a world away from Leila's, Tomaso is STRAPPED to a hospital bed with four-point medical restraints.

His face is BRUISED and the side of his head is shaved around a neatly stitched wound. He's had the shit kicked out of him.

Outside his locked room, Dr Rossi confers with the WARD PSYCHIATRIST. They look in at the patient as he struggles against his restraints, YELLING himself hoarse.

TOMASO (THROUGH THE GLASS)  
Leila. LEILA.

He looks insane.

EXT. PALAZZO COURTYARD - DAY

A private ambulance pulls into the courtyard outside the palazzo. Dozens of people mill about, watching with trepidation as Leila is unloaded on a gurney.

A ripple of excitement, gasps of awe as they see her enormous belly, now almost full term.

Leila is still drugged and woozy as she is wheeled through the crowd to the front door, Dr Rossi at her side.

LEILA  
What's happening?

Myrra hands the ambulance driver a wad of euros. The crowd parts reverently as she joins Dr Rossi at Leila's side.

MYRRA  
He's coming.

As if on cue, the crowd murmur in hushed union:

CROWD  
Papé.

It is terrifying. Leila looks around her. She tries to sit up but HANDS hold her down, firmly, as they wheel her inside.

INT. LEILA'S BEDROOM - DAY

It's an unbearably hot day and the air is loud with cicadas.

Leila is on her feet, her mind clear. She paces her room, a prisoner. Teresa sits in the corner, watching her every move.

A key UNLOCKS the door from the outside. Francesca enters carrying clean linens.

Leila looks at Francesca with barely veiled spite. Teresa shuffles out, taking the key and locking the door behind her.

LEILA  
Changing of the guard.  
(accusatory)  
You're keeping me prisoner.

Francesca strips the old sheets from the bed, refusing to look up at Leila. She speaks quietly.

FRANCESCA  
He'll be here soon.

Leila grabs Francesca's wrist, appealing to her, desperate.

LEILA  
Francesca please. You can't believe  
what Myrra's saying. She's crazy.  
They're all crazy.

She places Francesca's hand on her stomach, pleading.

LEILA (CONT'D)  
Please. Help me.

Francesca pauses. Her eyes prick with tears. For the first time, she looks her age. Young and vulnerable.

FRANCESCA  
You're so lucky. I was supposed to  
be The Vessel. We tried so many  
times.  
(eyes glazed and watery)  
But my babies all died. Inside me.  
You must be very special.

LEILA  
(screaming to get through)  
I'm not The Vessel.  
(MORE)

LEILA (CONT'D)

You have to listen to me. These people are sick. That man...

(pausing, softening)

Your babies died because what Papé did to you was ungodly, unnatural. I can help you. We can leave here, together. Please.

Francesca is quiet, as if maybe she is considering. She is about to say something when the LOCK TURNS loudly and Myrra enters carrying a SMALL BOWL.

Piero shuffles in behind her, running into Francesca's arms. He looks even paler than usual as he fumbles for her breast.

Justin is there too, arms folded in the doorway.

LEILA (CONT'D)

You can't keep me here forever.

MYRRA

Sit. He must eat.

Leila looks from Myrra to Justin, she can either chose to sit or be made to sit. Keeping her eyes locked on Myrra's, she lowers herself onto the bed.

Myrra spoons something from the bowl to Leila's mouth. It only takes a second for Leila to recognize the taste.

She SPITS the liquid into Myrra's face. It's BLOOD.

Myrra straightens. Blood drips down her face but she makes no move to wipe it away. Instead she NODS to Justin.

He steps forward, restraining Leila's arms behind her with one hand, forcing her mouth open with the other. He's strong.

Calmly, Myrra begins force-feeding Leila the blood.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

We have to keep the cycle pure.  
Just as the daughter feeds the son,  
so shall the son feed the father.

Francesca clutches Piero even tighter to her chest as he suckles the milk from her. We now see his arm has been BANDAGED where he has been BLED.

Leila struggles, choking. Blood trickles down her chin but she cannot escape.

Francesca, unable to watch any more, takes Piero and leaves.

The bowl finally empty, Myrra nods. Justin releases Leila and leaves the room.

Leila collapses into sobs, gasping for air. She curls up into a ball. Only now does Myrra wipe her own face.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

You shouldn't waste, Leila. It's disrespectful.

Myrra strolls over to the balcony. She looks down at the courtyard and the village beyond.

Below her, the palazzo's inhabitants hustle and bustle, making preparations for a great celebration.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

Papé's resurrection is the miracle we needed. Now everyone will believe.

A smile of pride crosses over the matriarch's face. Like a queen surveying her kingdom.

TOMASO (PRE-LAP)

*They needed me out of the way. So they could take my baby.*

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE, PSYCHIATRIC WARD - DAY

Tomaso, wearing faded scrubs, sits opposite the Ward Psychiatrist we saw earlier. He looks exhausted but he's trying to maintain his composure.

[The ensuing italicized conversation takes place in Italian with subtitles.]

TOMASO

*My sister-*  
 (correcting himself,  
 bitterly)  
*-my mother is trying to convince you I'm crazy to hide the fact that she's running some sort of fucking cult up there.*

Tomaso realizes that the angrier he gets, the crazier he seems. He grits his teeth, reining it in.

TOMASO (CONT'D)

*My wife... My wife needs me. She's-*

WARD PSYCHIATRIST

*Do you remember attacking your wife?*

TOMASO

*I didn't touch her.*

WARD PSYCHIATRIST

*Tell me, why might you want to hurt your baby?*

TOMASO

(bursting into English)

*I didn't touch her. They're lying. They're all lying. You have to let me out of here. I'm an American.*

The psychiatrist remains unmoved by Tomaso's outburst.

INT. REC-ROOM, PSYCHIATRIC WARD - DAY

The mixed common area is relatively civilized. Two dozen male and female patients in varying states of mental disarray occupy the room, keeping mostly to themselves.

A few visitors, in NAME TAGS, sit near loved ones, weary.

Tomaso sits alone in the corner. He is ready to give up.

Over by the window, a SCRAWNY WOMAN with long greasy hair stands looking out at the mountains. She TAPS the glass idly.

An OLDER WOMAN with a visitor's badge sits nearby, knitting.

Irritated by the noise, Tomaso looks up and sees the scrawny woman's REFLECTION in the window. Her face is familiar.

He approaches, slowly. It's the woman who was screaming outside the palazzo all those months ago.

TOMASO

Elena?

He reaches out, turning her to face him. Her face is BLANK. The old woman puts down her knitting.

ELENA'S MOTHER

Get away from my daughter?

TOMASO

I need to talk to her. My name is Tomaso Argenti.

The second that name passes his lips, Elena lets out a deafening guttural CRY.

Inside her mouth, the scarred STUMP of a severed tongue.

EXT. CASTIGLIONE, SIDE STREET - DAY

CLOSE ON: Two dark HOLLOW eyes set in a feathery face, above a sharp pointed BEAK. It's a MASK, woven together from straw and animal parts. It's primitive, pagan.

Members of the palazzo sit in the shade from the afternoon heat, putting finishing touches on their masks.

The village has been decorated for a medieval festa. Tables have been laid and wreathes of olive branches and wild flowers have been hung throughout the village. Two people fill medieval OIL-BURNING SCONCES from big CANNISTERS of oil.

The shutters on the houses are all CLOSED and the SCARRED MAN passes by, knocking loudly on every door. There is no answer.

He makes his way over to a woman in a FOX MASK sitting on a raised stage, surveying everyone's efforts.

SCARRED MAN

They're all gone. The locals. The village is empty.

The mask lifts to reveal Myrra.

MYRRA

Close the gates.

The Scarred Man heads off. Myrra scans the faces around her.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

Where's Francesca?

INT. PALAZZO ARGENTI, UPSTAIRS - DAY

Francesca walks towards Leila's bedroom. The palazzo is abuzz with activity. People are getting ready for the festa and some are already wearing their masks.

INT. LEILA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Francesca unlocks the door and slips inside. She looks nervous, furtive.

The bedroom is empty. She continues on into -

INT. LEILA'S BATHROOM - DAY

Teresa sits on a stool watching like a hawk as Leila takes a bath, hunched up and trying to cover herself.

FRANCESCA  
(to Teresa)  
Leave. I'll take over.

TERESA  
*Your mother told me to bathe her in  
preparation for tonight.*

FRANCESCA  
And I'm telling you to leave.

Displeased but outranked, Teresa leaves. Francesca waits to hear the bedroom door being locked behind her.

FRANCESCA (CONT'D)  
No one outside of the family has  
seen this.

She pulls something from behind her back. A manuscript. Leila, still covering herself, barely looks up.

LEILA  
What is it?

FRANCESCA  
It's Papé's second book. It's  
unfinished, untranslated.  
(taking a deep breath)  
You need to know what they're going  
to do to you.

INT. REC-ROOM, PSYCHIATRIC WARD - DAY

Tomaso sits in a quiet corner with Elena's mother. Elena sits nearby, rocking herself soothingly.

ELENA'S MOTHER  
*Your sister had her tongue cut out  
before they had her committed.  
Punishment for showing up at the  
Palazzo that day.*  
(sad, resigned)  
*Maybe it's where she belongs now.  
She never recovered after they took  
her son.*

TOMASO  
*So Piero really is hers?*

## ELENA'S MOTHER

*She was your father's nurse when he first got sick. He raped her and when she fell pregnant they told her she was special, called her-*

TOMASO  
(realizing)  
The Vessel.

FRANCESCA (PRE-LAP)  
"The Vessel--"

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Francesca reading from Papé's manuscript, translating:

## FRANCESCA

*"-is the conduit through which the pure soul shall seek its return. The Vessel must be purged and pure in order for the spirit to thrive. She shall be fed of his body, supped of his blood."*

CLOSE ON: The manuscript is full of annotated DIAGRAMS and illustrations. This one shows ink drawings of a DEVELOPING FOETUS in utero. It looks alien and strange.

INT. REC-ROOM, PSYCHIATRIC WARD - DAY

## ELENA'S MOTHER

*They gave her money, food. There was a doctor... But as the baby grew, your father recovered. They told her she had failed but they still wanted the child.*

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

## FRANCESCA

*"When the moon waxes in the 8th cycle The Vessel shall be laid open and the child plucked from her quartered womb."*

CLOSE ON: Graphic, ANATOMICAL DIAGRAMS show the intersecting incisions to be made to The Vessel's abdomen. She is to be PEELED OPEN like a flower.

## FRANCESCA (CONT'D)

*"For it is only through death that new life shall be attained."*

INT. REC-ROOM, PSYCHIATRIC WARD - DAY

ELENA'S MOTHER

*If those people believe your wife  
is truly The Vessel, she will not  
be so lucky as my daughter.*

Elena's rocking is frantic now, tears stream down her face.

ELENA'S MOTHER (CONT'D)

*They will butcher your wife and you  
will never see your child again.*

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Francesca lowers the manuscript. She looks at Leila who is staring at the pages in abject horror.

Her lip trembles when she finally dares to speak. She's only a child. A broken, abused, confused child.

FRANCESCA

I don't know if it's true that he's  
inside you. But if you stay here  
they will kill you.

Tears roll silently down Leila's cheeks. She barely reacts as Francesca kneels down beside the tub and presses something into her hand: a spare key to the bedroom.

FRANCESCA (CONT'D)

(hurried, conspiratorial)  
Wait until dusk. There's a feast to  
honor his coming. The palazzo will  
be empty. It's your only chance.  
Tonight the moon-

MYRRA (O.C.)

What's going on?

Suddenly, Myrra is in the doorway. Francesca jumps, DROPPING the key in the tub. Leila snaps out of her traumatized daze.

The key, her only hope for escape, is clearly visible on the bottom of the smooth white bath.

FRANCESCA

Nothing. I was...making sure she's  
clean. For tonight.

Leila rapidly starts rubbing herself with a BAR OF SOAP. It's suspicious and Myrra is no fool.

MYRRA

Stand up.

Leila does so, clutching the soap, covering herself.

Myrra steps forwards, looking down into the tub. Checking to see what Leila was hiding. But the tub is empty. No key.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

(to Francesca, suspicious)

*Help me prepare The Vessel's robes.*

Francesca and Myrra move back into the bedroom, leaving the door wide.

In her hand, Leila turns over the bar of soap. Pressed into its soft underside - the key.

INT. PSYCHIATRIC WARD - DUSK

Elena is still now. It is Tomaso who seems to rock, his body rippling with emotion.

TOMASO

*You have to tell them. Help me get out of here. I have to save her.*

ELENA'S MOTHER

*It's no use. No one will listen.  
Your family have paid them not to.  
(standing)  
I'm sorry. I can't help you.*

Tomaso is too broken to stop her as she picks up her handbag and walks over to the gated entry. The GUARDS open the door.

At that moment Elena grabs Tomaso's wrist.

Suddenly she's there, right in his face. Her lips come together over her tongueless mouth to make one simple word.

ELENA

*Go.*

With unexpected strength she violently UPTURNS the table between them, SCREAMING like a banshee. She's wild.

The Guards rush towards her, leaving the door momentarily UNGUARDED. Tomaso sees his chance. He makes a break for it.

EXT. HOSPITAL - DUSK

Tomaso bursts out of a fire escape at the back of the hospital where a few cars are parked.

The sun is low in the sky but the air is still muggy. Tomaso pulls off his shirt as he walks along the row of cars.

He selects an older-looking model without an alarm and wraps his shirt around his elbow, SMASHING the window.

INT. PALAZZO ARGENTI, UPSTAIRS - EVENING

The palazzo is still and quiet. From outside Leila's room, we hear a LOCK TURN.

Leila sticks her head out into the hallway. It's empty.

INT. PALAZZO ARGENTI, DOWNSTAIRS - EVENING

Leila tiptoes towards the front door. She's almost there when it OPENS, from the outside and two MASKED figures enter.

The masks are unnervingly animalistic.

Leila manages to duck behind a pillar just in time and the pair make their way into the kitchen.

As soon as they are out of sight, Leila slips out.

EXT. CASTIGLIONE, PIAZZA - EVENING

Long tables are laid for the great feast. Far more people than attended Papé's funeral. All wearing animal masks.

Wine flows freely and there is an air of debauchery. Joyous celebration verging on lewd abandon.

Myrra sits at the head of the table. People come to kiss her hand, kneel at her side. She is an empress.

EXT. CASTIGLIONE, SIDE STREET - EVENING

Hiding in the shadows of a narrow side-street, Leila witnesses the revelries. She must find another way out of the walled village.

She hurries back, into the alley, moving as fast as she can away from the jackals feasting in the piazza.

As she slips away she does not notice the LONE FIGURE standing a hundred yards away. Watching.

From this distance it's hard to tell if it's a man or a woman. In place of a human face, a PIG'S HEAD.

The porcine head cocks to one side. Slowly, silently, the FIGURE starts to follow Leila down the quiet alley.

EXT. CASTIGLIONE - EVENING

The oil-burning torches cast a flickering light as Leila stumbles down the maze-like alleyways.

Suddenly, she spots something familiar: Emma's house.

Like all the rest, the shutters are closed but there is a crack of LIGHT inside.

Leila POUNDS on the door, trying to keep her voice low.

LEILA

Emma. Emma. Jesus Christ let me in.

The door CRACKS open. Aunt Zora's wizened face peers out.

As soon as she sees Leila she tries to close the door on her but Leila pushes her aside.

INT. EMMA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Leila barges in, shutting the door behind her and BOLTING it.

She ignores the old woman's protests. She calls out:

LEILA

Emma, Emma?

(to Zora)

Where's Emma? *Dov' é Emma?*

Just then a VOICE from outside the door. A key in the lock.

EMMA (O.C.)

Leila? Is that you?

Leila rushes to the door, throwing back the bolt.

On the doorstep, Emma's rosy cheeks are enough to bring tears of joy to Leila's eyes. Leila grabs her, pulling her inside.

Zora's muttered and incoherent PROTESTATIONS get louder. She seems to be chanting or praying but they ignore her.

EMMA (CONT'D)

What are you doing here? They told me you'd gone back to America.

LEILA

(exploding, jumbled)

They locked me up. They want my baby. They think it's him - they're going to cut it out. They're trying to kill me. I have to find Tomaso.

EMMA

Woah. Slow down there.

(to Zora, silencing her)

*Zitto.*

(back to Leila)

Why don't you sit down?

LEILA

No, I have to go now. You have to get me out of the village.

Zora's MUMBLINGS get louder as she continually CROSSES herself. It builds until suddenly -

Emma SNAPS, SLAPPING Zora hard across the face with the back of her hand.

The old woman falls to the floor. Leila is stunned.

She staggers back, away from Emma who tries to placate her. Her kind Scottish voice is almost convincing.

EMMA

Shhhh... Shhh... It's okay. Don't be scared, love. It's still me.

Leila puts the kitchen table between them.

EMMA (CONT'D)

I'm here to help you. What's happening tonight, it's a great privilege. Don't you see?

Emma's eyes glisten with the religious zeal of a fanatic.

EMMA (CONT'D)

I've been waiting my whole life for a sign like this. Some meaning to our existence. It wasn't until I met you that I understood why I was here. Why we're all here. Papé's showing us how to ascend. It's a miracle. You are our miracle.

Leila is shaking with rage. She looks around the KITCHEN for a weapon as Emma CIRCLES slowly towards her. Her hand lights on a MEAT MALLET.

LEILA

Stay back. You fucking psycho.

The kindness vanishes from Emma's face. Hanging by the door, Emma spots Zora's rusty old SCYTHE. She grabs it, grinning.

LEILA (CONT'D)

You wouldn't dare. I'm The Vessel.

EMMA

You're dying tonight anyway. I think they might thank me.

She SLASHES wildly across the table, blocking Leila's only way out and missing her by inches.

As Emma lunges again, she is suddenly RAMMED from behind.

Zora has run full tilt into Emma, SPLAYING her over the table, knocking over chairs.

Looking up from the table, Emma is livid.

Before Leila can think, she SWINGS the mallet down hard on Emma's exposed TEMPLE.

And just like that, it's over.

The scythe drops from Emma's hand. She HANGS like a rag doll across the kitchen table.

Leila lets the mallet fall. Frozen to the spot.

Zora shuffles around the table. She stoops to pick up the fallen scythe and presses it into Leila's hand.

Solemnly she crosses herself then lifts a CRUCIFIX NECKLACE from around her neck and places it over Leila's head.

She unbolts the door, silently and gestures for Leila to run.

EXT. EMMA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

On the doorstep Emma's MASK lies discarded by the door. Made with pig's ears and a dried snout it is grotesquely real.

The hollow eyes seem to follow Leila as she slips out of the house and disappears down the street.

## I/E. STOLEN CAR, ROAD TO CASTIGLIONE - NIGHT

Tomaso swerves dangerously fast up the winding mountain road to Castiglione. The road is virtually empty but the tight turns are perilous.

A sign at a junction points out the turning for Castiglione. Tomaso is about to turn the wheel when he sees a *carabinieri* barrier blocking the road. An officer stands by his car.

Tomaso PASSES without stopping. Around the next bend, he pulls the car over to the side of the road.

## EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

It's dark now as Tomaso moves ON FOOT through the woods a few miles outside of Castiglione. He moves quickly, quietly.

Below him, the road is just visible, along with the idling *carabiniere* guarding the road.

## EXT. CASTIGLIONE STREETS - NIGHT

Leila hurries through the darkened streets of the village.

Ahead, she can see the closed MAIN GATE, only 100 yards away.

Suddenly, from an adjacent street a loud voice.

DEBORA (O.C.)

She's gone. The Vessel is gone.

A tall male figure comes running into view, by the gate. He checks the gate is still closed.

SCARRED MAN

She's still inside the walls.

MYRRA (O.C.)

Find her. If this is how she wants it, we will hunt her down.

Suddenly Leila sees figures FLITTING past the ends of each alleyway. The Scarred Man stays to guard the gate.

They scatter out to find her, WHOOPING with excitement, the thrill of the chase. But in their masks, it is the animals who are hunting Leila.

EXT. CASTIGLIONE, ALLEY - NIGHT

With the sound of her pursuers all around her, Leila moves as fast as she can through the cobbled streets.

She takes a narrow alley away from the voices, passing a broken torch that drips FLAMING LIQUID onto the stones below.

The alleyway emerges by a portion of the wall we have seen before: the PORTHOLE overlooking the vineyard.

Knowing that her time is limited, Leila rushes to the porthole, clambering inside feet first.

The walls here are several feet thick and as Leila slips inside the wall, shuffling forward on her back, the world grows still and quiet.

All she can hear is her own heartbeat, POUNDING in her ears.

Her legs reach the other side.

She clutches the scythe in one hand as she uses the other to propel herself forward. Suddenly a SOUND behind her.

LEILA'S POV:

She tilts her head up to look behind her. Framed by the porthole, the upside-down face of a grotesque humanoid RABBIT looks back at her quizzically.

BACK TO SCENE.

The Rabbit Man lets out an ear-piercing SHRILL, alerting the others to the location of their quarry.

He reaches into the wall, GRABBING at her hair.

Leila SWINGS the scythe inside the narrow opening.

It does little but buy her enough time to get clear of the porthole. She finds herself on the terraces on the other side of the wall. She is out.

The Rabbit Man is already inside the porthole pulling himself through, arms first. His HANDS emerge on the other side.

Leila brings the scythe down HARD, partially SEVERING both hands at the wrists.

The Rabbit Man CRIES out, his voice ECHOING in the stone wall. All that is visible are his bloody hands.

Leila takes off.

Slowed greatly by her size, she must virtually sit to slide down the terraces.

But the cries of her pursuers grow louder as she hears a wrought-iron SIDE-GATE being opened.

Dozens of people SPILL out of the walls and into the vineyards, each carrying a burning torch.

Her breath comes quick and fast. That sheer visceral panic of being chased.

On this dark moonless night, she can see their flaming torches closing in on her. Surrounding her.

Soon there is no where to turn. The torches come closer and closer, revealing their carriers one by one as they encircle Leila.

Unarmed now, and too tired and breathless to run, Leila is at their mercy.

She SPINS, looking from one to the next, backing away but unable to escape.

Suddenly a firm ARM grabs her from behind.

A man in a WILD BOAR mask, complete with bristles and tusks, holds her still as he PLUNGES a SYRINGE in her neck.

EXT. CASTIGLIONE, MAIN GATE - NIGHT

Tomaso approaches the main gate, sweat-drenched and covered in scratches.

The village seems very still. There are no lights in the vineyard now and no hunting cries.

The gate is CLOSED but seems unguarded. Tomaso reaches his arm through to unbolt the gate.

Suddenly, Tomaso's arm is grabbed.

The Scarred Man pulls Tomaso forward, up against the bars, and quickly plunges a SWITCH-BLADE between his ribs.

Caught totally by surprise, Tomaso falls back, clutching his bleeding side.

He has fallen at the last hurdle.

The Scarred Man opens the gate wide and approaches Tomaso. He seems nervous, pulling off his FEATHERED MASK.

## SCARRED MAN

Forgive me. It was decreed.

He kneels by the side of the man whose hand he kissed not long ago and who now lies dying.

Tomaso's LIPS begin to move as he stares up at the night sky.

The Scarred Man leans down to hear him.

As he does Tomaso GRABS his head in both hands, HEAD-BUTTING him hard, SHATTERING his nose instantly.

In seconds Tomaso is on top of him, down on the ground, still clutching the Scarred Man's SKULL between his hands.

Bleeding, driven by pure adrenaline and bile, Tomaso SMASHES the man's head again and again on the unforgiving pavement.

The Scarred Man's limbs go LIMP after the first impact. By the third, fourth, fifth, he is DEAD.

Tomaso releases him, sickened by his own actions.

He staggers to his feet, picking up the Scarred Man's mask and putting it on as he slips inside the walled village.

He is BLEEDING badly as he makes his way towards the palazzo.

## EXT. CASTIGLIONE, SIDE STREET - NIGHT

The streets are eerily quiet as Tomaso rounds the corner and comes in sight of the palazzo.

He sees Francesca carrying a BAG in one hand, a sleeping Piero on her hip. She is escaping.

She FREEZES when she sees him in the mask. She tries to cover her fear with anger.

## FRANCESCA

What are you doing here? You're meant to be guarding the gate?

Tomaso stumbles, the blood-loss making him weak. The mask falls from his face as he drops to one knee.

Seeing it is Tomaso, Francesca rushes to his side.

## FRANCESCA (CONT'D)

Tomaso. What happened? How did you get here? My god-

TOMASO  
(pushing her off)  
Get away from me. You're one of  
them. Where's Leila?

FRANCESCA  
I'm not part of this. I won't be  
part of it. I just want to get  
Piero away from here.

TOMASO  
(slurred)  
Leila.

FRANCESCA  
(gasping at the sight of  
his wound)  
Let me help you.

TOMASO  
Don't touch me. Where's Leila?

But Francesca pays no heed. She pulls a scarf from her neck  
and ties it tightly around his ribs. He winces but the  
bleeding seems to slow.

FRANCESCA  
Leila is in the church. We may be  
to late to stop them but I'll help  
you.  
(helping him stand)  
You're my brother. Your blood is my  
blood. Your shame is my shame.

She tries to look brave but as Tomaso looks at her, clutching  
little Piero to her chest, he can see that she is trembling.

TOMASO  
No. Get out of here.

FRANCESCA  
I can help you. I can-

TOMASO  
Take the boy. Keep him safe.

FRANCESCA  
What will you do?

TOMASO  
I'm going to kill them all.

INT. VILLAGE CHURCH - NIGHT

Leila comes to in unfamiliar surroundings.

LEILA'S POV: Directly overhead, an enormous FRESCO ceiling depicts a WOMAN, saintly-looking, NAKED. Her face very recognizable as Leila's.

But her body has been transformed. Her abdomen is QUARTERED and peeled back like a blooming rose, a perfect INFANT emerging from her womb.

Everything goes BLACK as Leila screws her eyes SHUT.

Over the BLACKNESS we hear a CHATING, low at first but growing louder. Dozens of voices in perfect union.

CROWD

Papé Satàn, Papé Satàn Aleppo. Papé  
Satàn, Papé Satàn Aleppo.

It is the invocation of Plutus in the seventh circle of Dante's *Inferno*. A chant that builds to an ecstatic frenzy.

LEILA'S POV:

Opening her eyes once again, Leila looks around her.

The crowd of palazzo members encircle her, swaying as one. Many are topless, some naked. All MASKED.

The old church has been gutted and white washed, temple now to a different sort of religion.

In the light of the burning torches, the skin of the assembled crowd seems to glow.

Leila looks up. A woman stands over her wearing a particularly insidious FOX mask. Myrra.

At her feet, the Wild Boar Man is recognizable as Dr Rossi. He prepares a tray of simple surgical tools.

BACK TO SCENE.

Leila is TIED DOWN, spread-eagled, to an altar-like table at the centre of the empty church.

She has been dressed in a virginal white robe.

Myrra raises her hands and the crowd come to a perfect STOP.

MYRRA

And just as it was prophesied so  
shall it be done.

She reaches out and takes an ORNAMENTAL KNIFE from Dr Rossi.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

(as if quoting scripture)  
"Father's soul shall through pure  
blood ascend. From death he came  
and now through death returns".

Myrra raises the knife and Leila awaits the fatal blow.

But Myrra takes the knife to her own palm, SLICING it open.

She lets the BLOOD pump from the wound and then places a  
bloody HANDPRINT upon Leila's white robe.

MYRRA (CONT'D)

"Return to me, and through my blood  
return. Papé Satàn."

She mutters this like a blessing, over the prostrate Leila.

Terrified, Leila appeals to Myrra, quietly pleading.

LEILA

It's not real. Please. It's not  
real.

Myrra leans in very CLOSE, hovering her face over Leila's.  
She WHISPERS only loud enough for Leila to hear.

MYRRA

Don't you see? They believe and so  
they'll make it real.

She looks Leila dead in the eye as she slowly stands, a cold,  
wicked smile dancing on her lips. The embodiment of evil.

She hands the knife to someone else.

This man slices his hand open and copies Myrra's invocation.

MASKED MEMBER

"Return to me, and through my blood  
return. Papé Satàn".

The knife is passed on as hand after bloody hand is pressed  
upon Leila's body.

The waiting crowd begin to CHANT and DANCE as excitement  
builds and the ritual continues.

EXT. VILLAGE CHURCH - NIGHT

Tomaso follows the sound of the chanting towards the church. The door is ajar, the HEAVY-DUTY PADLOCK now hanging OPEN.

He pulls the feathered mask back down over his face.

INT. VILLAGE CHURCH - NIGHT

Tomaso slips inside. He is visibly taken aback to see how many people fill the empty church.

All eyes are on the centre of the room as people jump, dance, sway and convulse with fanatical fervor.

He can only make out glimpses of the woman in the white robe splayed out on the platform like a sacrificial lamb.

It takes everything in him not to rush straight to Leila's side.

Shirtless, bloodied and wearing his mask, Tomaso's presence elicits no attention.

Stealthily, he moves around taking in the situation.

His eyes light on a pair of OIL-CANNISTERS, used to fill the torches.

LEILA'S POV:

We feel Leila's overwhelming sense of TERROR and vulnerability as people continue to touch her. The sea of faces blurry around her.

BLACKNESS as she SHUTS her eyes.

She opens them again.

Through the naked, sweating bodies, she catches a GLIMPSE of a familiar figure. It's only a split-second but something about him is different to everyone else.

She screws her eyes SHUT.

FLASH TO:

CLOSE ON: Two hands, fingers intertwined against a New York skyline. A jarring, split-second image.

BACK TO:

LEILA'S POV:

The man in the FEATHERED MASK moves around the perimeter of the room, slowly, carefully. He's carrying something.

She loses him again.

FLASH TO:

CLOSE ON: Tomaso's hand, slipping a simple WEDDING BAND onto Leila's finger. A bright, beautiful, split-second image.

BACK TO:

LEILA'S POV:

Leila CRANES desperately to see, glimpsing the man again. She knows that frame, that body, that wedding ring. It's Tomaso.

BACK TO SCENE.

Tomaso's body and hair GLISTEN wetly as he continues to move around the room, POURING out the contents of a second canister of oil.

Rivulets of OIL trickle across the floor, unnoticed by the crowd who grab and jostle one another, joyously.

Everyone's skin is slick with SWEAT in the stifling room.

Suddenly, someone SEIZES Tomaso, spinning him around.

For a moment, he thinks he's been discovered.

But the woman simply passes him the KNIFE, gesturing for him to approach The Vessel.

Tomaso allows the oil-can to drop to the floor, where it continues to spill its liquid contents.

Knife in hand he pushes his way to the centre of the room.

There she is, his wife, almost full-term, covered in bloody handprints, terrified and helpless.

He stands over her, looking her in the eye.

She knows it is him, even in that mask.

She shakes her head from side to side, tears flowing freely.

LEILA

No. No no no no no.

Not you. Not you. Not you.

Tomaso leans down, bringing his face close to Leila's. He does not have long. Some are already looking at him suspiciously.

TOMASO  
(whispered)  
Do you trust me?

The sound of his voice seems to calm Leila immediately.

She looks him in the eye. She nods.

He strokes her hair, lovingly. One last tender moment.

TOMASO (CONT'D)  
(whispered)  
I love you so much Leila.

He raises the knife high over head.

In one swooping motion he SEVERs the ties around her wrists.

Immediately the crowd SURGE forward a step. But Tomaso brings the knife to Leila's huge pregnant belly.

TOMASO (CONT'D)  
Don't move. Step back.

Everyone freezes. The room is silent.

Tomaso helps Leila to sit up, keeping the knife by her belly. Her legs are still tied at the ankles.

TOMASO (CONT'D)  
(to the closest man)  
You. Cut her free.

The man does not move.

TOMASO (CONT'D)  
Do it or I'll kill the baby. I  
swear to god.

The man wavers, about to step forward when a VOICE stops him.

MYRRA (O.C.)  
Stop. He's bluffing.

The crowd parts to reveal Myrra. She pushes off her mask. She seems amused by Tomaso's show of bravery.

MYRRA (CONT'D)  
The prodigal son returns.

TOMASO  
 (to the same man)  
 Untie her feet. Now.

But Myrra is back in control.

MYRRA  
 You would never hurt that child,  
 Tomaso. We all know it. You want  
 that baby even more than we do.

For a moment, SILENCE. Tomaso's bluff has been called. The balance of power has shifted.

But then Leila speaks, her voice SOFT, CALM. She speaks to Tomaso as if they were alone. Looking only at him.

LEILA  
 All I ever needed was you. You are  
 my family.  
 (placing her hand on his)  
 And if Papé is truly inside me,  
 this isn't our baby.

Myrra hears the truth in Leila's voice. She sees Leila's hand on Tomaso's, the tip of the knife GRAZING her belly.

MYRRA  
 (scared now)  
 Untie her. Now. Hurry.

Two people step forward and quickly free Leila's feet.

Tomaso hoists her up, pulling her protectively under his arm, the knife incongruously still threatening her body.

Everyone backs away from them as they shuffle slowly towards the door.

MYRRA (CONT'D)  
 Let them go. How far can they get?

Tomaso grimaces, the wound in his side bleeding more heavily with the exertion.

Leila notices. She looks up at him, afraid.

He is dying.

CLOSE ON:

Leila's face they shuffle towards the door, the crowd parted before them. She must be strong.

Tomaso is pale. He leans into her neck, smelling her hair. He WHISPERS something in her ear.

We do not hear what he says, but from the tears that well in Leila's eyes, we know it is goodbye.

BACK TO SCENE.

The door is within reach, two burning sconces beside it.

Tomaso pulls away from Leila for a second.

He presses something into her hand. We do not see what.

He leans in and kisses her, deeply. So full of love.

LEILA'S POV:

Silence.

At first we think it is just the muted silence of the crowd, but as Tomaso pulls back from the kiss, his lips move and we hear nothing.

For a moment, the world seems to move in slow motion.

Leila STAGGERS back, pushed by Tomaso. Those two silent words still on his lips.

Suddenly she is OUTSIDE under the star-pricked night sky.

BACK TO SCENE.

Sound and time EXPLODE back like a blow to the head.

Tomaso has just pushed Leila out through the door.

As he SLAMS the doors closed in her face, he screams out those same two words:

TOMASO

Lock it.

EXT. VILLAGE CHURCH - NIGHT

Leila looks down at the object in her hand. It is the heavy-duty PADLOCK.

Knowing what she must do, she loops the padlock across the latch, SEALING the church closed.

Tomaso and dozens of other people inside.

INT. VILLAGE CHURCH - NIGHT

Without Leila as leverage, Tomaso has seconds before the crowd are upon him.

He reaches for the FLICKERING TORCH.

Just as they close in on him he throws it at his feet.

Immediately, he is ALIGHT as the floor of the church EXPLODES into flame, engulfing Tomaso and everyone else inside.

EXT. VILLAGE CHURCH - NIGHT

From outside, the sound of SCREAMING is suddenly MUTED.

The thick oak door of the church RATTLES for a few moments until eventually it stops.

High above, the stained-glass windows of the church GLOW as the inferno builds inside.

Leila is nowhere to be seen.

EXT. ROAD TO CASTIGLIONE - NIGHT

On the empty road, a lone figure staggers, barefoot, towards freedom. It is quiet here, peaceful.

Painted in bloody handprints, Leila looks strangely beautiful in the pre-dawn light that bathes the mountainside.

TOMASO (V.O.)

They're right, Leila. The baby is special.

CLOSE ON: Leila's eyes, red-rimmed, exhausted.

CUT TO:

Leila's eyes, just MOMENTS BEFORE, as Tomaso leans into her neck, whispering in her ear. Only now, we can hear him, his final words at the church. An intimate, private moment.

TOMASO

It's special because it's ours.  
Yours and mine and no one else's.

BACK TO:

Leila walks on, remembering Tomaso's parting words as tears stream down her face. She clutches her stomach protectively.

TOMASO (V.O.)  
If he lives, I live. Protect him  
always.

Weary and heart-broken, Leila stumbles.

TOMASO (V.O.)  
Love him like I love you. My heart,  
my life, my love.

Just as she is about to give up, Leila sees someone coming towards her on the road. Two figures, rushing to her aide.

Francesca swoops towards her, scooping her up, keeping her on her feet. Leila is no longer alone.

Together with Piero, the two women hold each other up as they slowly make their way towards a new life.

INT. DELTA AIRLINES FLIGHT - DAY

A plane soars high above the clouds where the sky is white and pristine.

A stewardess passes through the cabin handing out landing cards for arrival in New York.

Leila sits by the window, staring out at the white sky.

She turns to see a BABY, only a few weeks old, in a travel cot beside her.

Tenderly she reaches out and strokes his cheek. She smiles, a mother in love. His face, with its tiny features, is perfect.

He reaches up, wrapping his tiny hand around one of her fingers. He seems to look directly at her.

FADE TO BLACK.