

A Woman of the World

by Ed McWatt

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www.edmcwatt.com

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The litter jerked violently as one of the slaves slipped on the filthy cobblestones and almost fell. Messalina flicked the curtain open and spat an insult at the man.

'Cretin! Take more care!'

The slave made no reply but gripped the corner-handle of the covered couch all the more firmly in his sweating hands. The empress tentatively checked that the long pins structuring her carefully-arranged hairstyle had not come loose. No harm done. She considered asking for the man's name but decided to let it go, settling instead for insisting that she be allowed a carriage from now on.

'*Litters!*' she thought scornfully, '*Grandmother is welcome to them all!*'

From her perch within the privacy of the litter, she observed the darkening city moving past - the well-dressed clerks and businessmen hurrying up the Esquiline hill before night closed in, the slaves lighting torches above the bars and shops selling cheap meals that ran along the edge of the Subura district. Behind this row of run-down eateries rose lopsided apartment blocks, four storeys high and filled to the rafters with Rome's poor.

'*Squalid*' she thought to herself in disgust, the litter's plush curtains no defence against the smell of thousands of tightly-packed residents rolling like fog down every street and alley. Leering faces stared out of the shadows at the empress's procession, sometimes followed by a jeer or insult. Though she knew they could not possibly see her within the litter, she felt herself exposed to the scrutiny of the public. '*Why does this dratted man not have the taste to live in a nicer part of town?*' Messalina cursed.

Her twenty-one years spent as a daughter - and now wife - within Rome's most privileged families had rarely given her reason to venture beyond the elite Palatine neighbourhood, with its spreading pines, marble palaces and calm, pristinely-swept streets. Looking down at

the overflowing gutters and rotting rubbish the litter-carriers were traversing, she fought the impulse to retch.

By the time they reached the foot of the Quirinal hill, it was fully dark, the only light coming from the torches held by the purple-clad Praetorian guards who walked ahead and behind the litter. The buildings were now single houses, very different from the teetering apartments of the Subura. Messalina was starting to feel slightly less uncomfortable when from somewhere ahead came the distant clatter of running footsteps and a shouted warning or threat. The soldiers and slaves turned their heads in the direction of the noise but, more accustomed to the rhythms of the city's night than their passenger, did not pause.

'What is it?' she demanded shrilly, daring to dart her head between the curtains. The more senior of the bodyguards walked back to answer her.

'Nothing to worry about, Empress. Noises in the night are normal, out in the city.'

His reassurances would have been more convincing had they not been immediately followed by a woman's terrified scream, this time much closer. A second later, a figure burst from an alleyway and into the narrow circle of wavering torchlight surrounding the litter, collapsing in a heap at the feet of the soldier. The slaves reeled in alarm and the litter swayed precariously.

It was a woman, though her face was grimy, her matted hair plastered to her head and her age hard to judge. '*Fifty?*' Messalina guessed. '*Fifteen?*'

'You have to help -' she gasped, reaching for the man's leg with blackened fingernails. He instinctively stepped back, repulsed. From behind the curtains, the Empress stared, transfixed by this apparition from Rome's depths. Blood was oozing from a wound in the creature's side, slowly ebbing into the cobbles and glistening in the flicker of the torch's

flame. The two women's eyes met, three feet and many worlds apart. Messalina opened her mouth to speak but found herself without words.

Then, just as suddenly as the incident had begun, the slap of chasing feet from the alley shattered the strange scene. A triumphant 'Oh no you don't!' was grunted and, with another desperate scream, the woman was dragged backwards into the darkness again and out of sight. A wet thump was followed by the return of grim silence.

The Praetorian recovered his composure and leaned down to his mistress's curtain. 'Best we push on, Empress. Happens all the time, like I said. Escaped slave, no doubt. Soon be at your step-father's house now.' He shoved the nearest slave in the back and the litter jolted off again. Messalina glanced back at the blood smearing the roadway until it too was swallowed by the night, before suddenly remembering to check her hairpins again.

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'So sorry to keep you waiting, Empress' Appius Silanus said, smiling ingratiatingly. Messalina turned to face him, having spent the past ten minutes staring at the fire that warmed the house's atrium. She dipped her head fractionally in deference. She knew well the value of deliberate, calculated lateness. Ten minutes was enough to show dominance, but not enough to openly insult a visitor.

'Please do not mention it again, father. I am honoured to finally meet you.' Inside her head she seethed at the ridiculous power of the father figure in a Roman family, even one who had only just married into it. She was wife to the Emperor - cities trembled at her displeasure and heads had rolled at her whim. But to this man she was obliged to bow, because he had married her mother.

'It is I who am honoured by your visit, Empress, though I fear that it will not please you - your mother is unwell and sends her regrets.'

Messalina raised an eyebrow.

'Oh, really? That's most unlike her. Has a doctor been consulted?'

'I assure your Majesty that she is in the best hands, there is no need to worry.'

She stared at Silanus but could see only an open expression of concern.

'If we are to be father and daughter, it's probably less tedious if you just call me by my name' she eventually replied.

He nodded in understanding.

'Likewise. Please, sit down and let's use this chance to at least get to know each other' he suggested, gesturing towards the couches fringing the room. Messalina carefully selected the least dingy-looking one and perched ostentatiously on its edge. Silanus joined her.

'I had no opportunity to inspect this place before moving in' he apologised, aware that the house, even this whole region of the city, were several rungs below the standard of comfort expected by the imperial family. 'We will be moving closer to the palace within a few weeks.' Messalina looked at him impassively, doing nothing to relieve the man's embarrassment. Her long experience of dealing with men had taught her that they would usually fill any silence with useful information. Silanus was no different.

'After so many years away with the legions, it's strange to be back in Rome. Even stranger to be asked by the Emperor to marry your mother -' he left this sentence hanging in the air between them. Messalina decided she had been silent for long enough.

'The gods have blessed you, Silanus.'

'She is a wonderful woman' he offered in return.

Messalina suppressed a snort of amusement at the idea and managed to keep it from showing on her face. 'Mother will make a wife of distinction for any man, no matter what his... situation.'

Silanus stared at the floor for a moment before continuing with his apologies.

'I kept my house on the Palatine on for a while but - after I'd been away for five years it just seemed unnecessary.'

She smiled in outward sympathy. The man was rich - he'd been Consul after all - but must have thought his political career was over, having been shoved out to the edge of the Empire to rot away unnoticed for so long. But now her darling husband had seen fit to recall him for some reason - and to honour him with a marriage connection.

'Of course, Silanus. Totally pointless to have all that money tied up here while you were busy doing - What exactly was it you were doing?'

'Governor of Upper Spain' the man confirmed before adding 'An important position.'

'A-ha. Interesting work, was it?'

'Well, you know, the usual - army discipline, taxes, bandits, dealing with local disputes...'

Messalina nodded as if she was an expert on the day-to-day duties of a proconsul in the provinces but inwardly was beaming. Everything she had heard tonight told her that controlling this old soldier would be child's play. She had been worrying over nothing.

'Sounds ghastly' she declared archly. 'But now you're back at the heart of things, and my husband thinks you're someone to rely on.' She emphasised the words *my husband*, leaving Silanus in no doubt that she was still making up her mind. He didn't respond immediately, sizing up Messalina again. His face hardened subtly in the shadowy lamplight.

'Oh, yes' he continued after a while. 'He can certainly rely on me. As could you, daughter, if you wanted to.'

Messalina turned abruptly to fully face him. 'And what would that mean, General?' She thought she could probably guess, but wanted to hear it from him.

'We could be helpful to each other' the older man explained, leaning closer. 'I'm no fool. I'm back in Rome because the Emperor wants me where he can see me, and away from my legions. And I need to know what he is thinking.' She let him proceed without comment. 'I would value your... your news from the palace. And an occasional word in the Emperor's ear, when he needs to hear it. That is all.' He tried to downplay what he was asking with a dismissive sweep of his hand. Being cast as spy rather than mistress was a change she supposed, but nonetheless it was not a part she was willing to play for him.

'Why exactly would I do that, Silanus?'

'Why?' he enquired, confusion evident in his eyes. 'Because I have asked you to. And because you want me as a friend.' His voice carried a certainty and force entirely absent until now. Messalina drew slightly away from him but found the arm of the couch blocking any further retreat.

'Do you imagine that you're the first man to try and influence the Emperor through his wife?' she parried, forcing a laugh. 'Every man wants to be *my* friend!'

'No -' he replied 'But I'm the first one to be married to your mother.' He beckoned with a crooked finger at one of his men, who silently left the room.

Messalina looked at him quizzically then turned, startled, at a cry of pain from somewhere behind her. Silanus smiled back without humour as the man returned, dragging a woman by her hair as she struggled and yelped in pain. The pair approached the couch and Messalina's heart leapt with the terror of recognition.

'Mother!' she shrieked, rising to her feet in shock.

The woman being manhandled by Silanus's slave looked up, dazed, her face a mass of bruises. Her eyes - swollen and blackened - briefly filled with hope as they met her daughter's. Then the general nodded and the man dragged her back out of the atrium. 'Please, Empress - sit back down' he implored, gesturing at the couch as his new wife's whimpers faded. 'There's really no reason why I will need to hurt her again.' Messalina glared at the doorway for several seconds before recovering her control. She focussed on calming her breathing while she returned to her seat. Silanus waited until she was settled before continuing. 'So, as you can see, you really do want me as a friend.' 'Yes' she replied coolly, back in command of her voice. 'I can see that clearly now.'

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'First the Empress, and now a visit from the most powerful man in Rome - what next, is Claudius himself outside?' Silanus said playfully as Narcissus took the offered cup of wine from the slave attending them.

'Powerful? Oh, I don't know about that, General' the freedman said, 'It is you he has recalled in his hour of need.'

Silanus smiled and didn't try to hide his pride. It was true, after all - the Emperor had called him back from Spain and had given him the hand in marriage of his wife's mother. Now he was able to request a favour from the Emperor's top man, the hand behind the throne, and Narcissus would arrive at his door barely an hour later.

The mid-morning sun streamed through the opening high in the ceiling of the atrium and promised another warm spring day. The two men continued to walk side by side around the ornamental water pool that dominated the centre of the room, the General towering over the small Greek.

'How does the Emperor fare?' the old soldier asked, making innocent enough small talk.

'Very well General, very well indeed.'

'No sign of the -' he coughed to signal his discomfort in raising the subject ' - the old troubles that plagued his youth? He wasn't seen much in public when I was Consul here, but everyone heard the rumours...'

Narcissus was long-practiced in handling implications about his master's infirmities.

'Precisely, Silanus. Rumours, nothing more. Forget the gossip, it's unworthy of a man of your status. Emperor Claudius is in full control of his senses.'

The other man stopped and looked at Narcissus with a frown. 'It is also said that he believes that dreams are visions of the future?'

The freedman bristled slightly and continued to make his case. 'His childhood illness has left him lame, and his stutter makes the ignorant think that his mind is equally fractured. None of that is true. He has himself written a detailed history of Carthage just this last year - eight volumes. Quite well received, actually. Would you like me to have a copy sent to you?' His tone carried a slight edge and Silanus raised his hands in surrender.

'No need, Narcissus, I have complete faith in what you say. Please forgive the impertinence and remember how long I have been away. Just about the only thing that reaches Spain from Rome is the gossip.'

'Of course, let's speak no more of it.' A short silence fell between the two men before

Narcissus spoke again. 'You will shortly be invited to the palace to formally meet the Emperor, at which time we can discuss the role he wants you to play in his plans. There was no need to ask me to visit today - unless there was something else you wanted to raise?'

The former slave had been turning this question over in his sharp mind ever since Silanus's messenger had arrived.

Silanus sighed humorously and ran a hand through his short-cropped greying hair. 'Well, they said that nothing gets past you. At least *those* rumours were accurate! I did want to discuss one matter in private, before I meet the Emperor...' He looked meaningfully at Narcissus who returned his stare without any indication of whether he should proceed or not. '...That is, if it isn't inappropriate?'

'Speak, Silanus, and I will listen.'

The general took this as the most encouragement he was likely to get from the Emperor's inscrutable assistant. 'It's about your lands in Gallia Narbonensis.'

'What of them, General?' Narcissus said, his voice betraying no hint of interest.

'A gift from Claudius, I understand?'

Narcissus nodded. 'The Emperor rewards loyalty, Silanus.'

'Yes, very richly. You must have a fortune in land there. I suppose the thought is that you will retire there with your wife when the time comes?'

'I've given it no thought at all. I expect to be kept busy serving our Emperor for many years to come.'

Silanus paused his step again and ran a nervous finger around the rim of his cup. 'Perhaps that is just as well...' Narcissus stopped too and gave the soldier a pointed stare. The man continued. 'My march from Spain brought me through Narbonensis. Through your lands, in fact.' Silanus now had the freedman's full attention.

'And some of my men became unhappy as the distance from their homes and families grew. You know what soldiers are like. There were... disturbances. Some fires. A couple of nasty incidents. Perhaps accidental, I cannot say.'

'Try' Narcissus ordered.

Silanus smiled affably. 'Let's just say that I had to leave a substantial number of my men behind - to put things right, make sure there was no further damage. They're still there.'

Understanding, like the morning sunlight, had crept slowly over the freedman as Silanus's explanation had progressed.

'I see, Silanus. Presumably as long as they remain there, my property will be safe?'

'Presumably' the General shrugged, glad his guest was now getting it. 'It kind of depends, if I'm honest.'

Narcissus sighed inwardly and longed for the day when his status, property and happiness weren't under threat from some new ambitious climber. He folded his arms and resigned himself to this latest problem.

'Let's pretend you're capable of that, General. What precisely is it that you want me to do for you?'

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Messalina lowered her head backwards so that her raven-black hair was fully immersed in the bath's warm water, spreading out behind her like a fan. Despite the comfort and peace, her thoughts surged and buzzed across her mind. She had been unable to settle since she'd seen her mother's eyes last night. Minutes passed without a solution presenting itself before her ears, held just above the waterline, told her that someone else had entered the room.

'Majesty' Narcissus acknowledged. 'I am told that there is something I can help you with?'

The empress swallowed her anxiety, smiled and sat up. She had dealt with her husband's chief assistant long enough to know that, unlike many of the men in her life that she needed to manage, he would be completely unaffected by the sight of her bare skin.

'Quite right, Narcissus' she replied curtly, snatching a towel and dismissing the bath slaves with a flick of the wrist. The three women left silently, closing the door behind them. He waited several seconds before speaking again.

'Not going to invite me to join you then?' he asked, with a hint of humour reserved for only his most private conversations.

'I've given up on that tactic with you, Narcissus' Messalina conceded with a grin, twisting her dripping hair up in a linen cloth. 'To get you to do what I want, I need to offer you something different.'

He looked at her with an amused face. 'And that is?'

'Security, silly. Which is all any of us is after, isn't it?' The freedman nodded, accepting Messalina's point.

'It certainly can be wearying, having one's whole future tied to someone else. But you have no worries on that front, Majesty. The Emperor loves you more every day.'

Messalina gave him a withering look. 'We both know the fool barely remembers he's married until someone tells him. And anyway, it's not my marriage that worries me. It's his throne.'

'That is something that is harder to control' Narcissus conceded. 'Is there something specific I should know? What have you heard?'

'You first' she retorted, pulling on and belting a bath gown. Narcissus shrugged and began to reply.

'Nothing has reached my ears, Maj-'

'Oh please!' she cut across him angrily, her mask of light-heartedness slipping. 'You've been to see Silanus, just the same as I. And no doubt put the same charming friendship-with-menaces offer to you that he'd already made to me.'

Narcissus coughed and glanced back at the door. 'He did mention something about being kept informed, yes.'

'And his leverage?' she demanded.

Narcissus was wrongfooted by how quickly this conversation had got down to business. He looked around the room briefly, before judging that complete honesty was the best way forward. 'He has men occupying my property in Gaul' he said, quietly. 'You?'

'My mother has been on the end of beating, with more promised' she replied with a catch in her voice. Narcissus stared at his feet thoughtfully and took a few steps around the room.

'Well?' the Empress demanded after a few seconds had passed.

'I'm thinking, Majesty. Please, this isn't a simple problem.'

'Isn't it? The man has to die.'

'Well, obviously,' said Narcissus caustically, unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. 'But the question is how.'

'Same as all the others!' Messalina said, her voice rising. Narcissus held out a restraining hand and gestured with his eyes at the door.

'Majesty, calmness is what is called for here.' He bit his lip and thought for a few seconds longer. 'No, poison is not an option,' he finally concluded with a shake of his head. 'Not this time. You've seen his house - those attendants of his weren't slaves, they were his

legionaries. There's no reliable way we can introduce one of our people into his kitchens.'

Messalina started to object, but now it was Narcissus's turn to overrule her. 'Silanus was a canny Consul while in Rome, and you don't then survive five years out in bandit country without keeping your wits about you. We have to assume that he's got his personal security tied up as tightly as the Emperor's.'

Messalina's patience, thin at the best of times, was threatening to snap. 'I could have told you all the things that *wouldn't* work myself, you greasy little Greek! I called you here for answers, not more questions!'

Narcissus was unruffled by her outburst, having heard similar insults his whole life. He kept his voice level. 'And I have an answer for you, Majesty. There's no need to upset yourself.'

We shall have to work this one together, that is all.' He placed a reassuring hand on her damp shoulder before continuing.

'Now, tell me Empress, that rumour about you appearing on stage at the theatre before your marriage - any truth in that?'

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Two mornings later, the Field of Mars was filled with groups of men taking exercise and training together as Roman soldiers had for centuries. The river and the walls separated the open green field from the rattle and stink of the city, although it had begun to spill across the bridge in recent decades, having run out of space within its ancient boundary. Narcissus picked his way past pairs of wrestlers and skirted warily around the javelin range before he saw the place his man had told him Silanus could be found most mornings - a fenced off enclosure for sword practice. He stood some fifty yards off and squinted at the combattants. His source was good - there indeed was the old General, sweating like a donkey and hacking away at a wooden post standing in for a rebellious Spaniard. Narcissus unconsciously shook his head. He knew this was a time-honoured army tradition, but still - the man was past sixty. What did he think he looked like? The ex-slave walked up and joined the selection of legionaries, small boys and idling citizens leaning on the fence to watch the various mock sword fights taking place.

Silanus spent another ten minutes going through the motions of various strokes before stopping to take a drink and to cool down. His face was deep red and the sweat flowed freely from his scalp as he looked out at the small crowd that he imagined was there to see him train. It took Narcissus only a few seconds to catch his eye. The general handed his water

jug and sword to a waiting legionary, walked to the fence corner nearest to Narcissus and began to stretch his aging hamstrings.

'Never took you for a military man' he said jovially. Narcissus made certain that no one was close enough to overhear their conversation before replying.

'I have had my moments, Silanus.'

'Come to accept my offer?'

'I've had time to think on it, yes' the freedman admitted. 'I can't see the harm in keeping you up to date with the Emperor's intentions, seeing as you feature so prominently in his plans.'

Silanus switched legs. 'Good. I knew you'd make the smart move. When the tide is rising, it makes sense to swim with it.'

'Indeed, general. And in that spirit, I wanted to let you know something else in confidence - hence coming here rather than your home.'

'Oh yes?'

'I imagine the Emperor's invitation has arrived by now?'

Silanus grunted his agreement, still slightly short of breath. 'Herald came last night. I have an audience first thing tomorrow morning. Didn't say anything else.'

'Well, what that messenger couldn't convey was the nature of the job the Emperor needs you for.' The other man said nothing so Narcissus continued, lowering his voice almost to a whisper. 'He's lost faith in Geta.'

Silanus's head turned slightly at the mention of the chief of the Emperor's guard. 'The Praetorian Prefect?'

'The same. Doesn't trust him anymore. Let's just say that the man has interests that go beyond the safety of the imperial family.' He let this news sink in for a second before continuing. 'Obviously, this is a deeply worrying position for any Emperor to be in and a particularly thorny problem to solve.' Silanus stayed silent, considering this new information.

Claudius relied on his Praetorian guard to keep him secure in power. But who could protect him from them?

'Why are you telling me this now?' he eventually whispered back.

'Because I'm worried you might not get the chance to hear it from the Emperor, if news gets out before then. Geta somehow learns of every word from the palace.' Narcissus waited until the other man looked up so that he could hold his eye. 'It's very possible that the palace guards will try and deny you entry when you arrive for your meeting tomorrow morning.'

Silanus considered this for a moment. 'And if they do?'

'If they do, then they've found out the Emperor's plan and he will be in danger. You must be prepared. Bring enough men, and don't take no for an answer. You may need to save him'.

The general straightened up and nodded thoughtfully, staring back across the practice field at the city beyond. 'Thanks for the warning, friend' he said.

* * * * *

She was awake at first light, long before her husband and with plenty of time to compose her thoughts and gather herself for what was to follow. She did not have too long to wait. A little over an hour later, the clank of some distant cart's axle drifted in through the open window of the imperial apartments, Claudius turned over and scratched his side, mumbled something incoherent and slowly began to surface from sleep. Messalina arranged one pillow behind her back and held the other closely to her chest and started to cry bitterly.

The Emperor took a few seconds to comprehend what was happening. 'Eh?' he muttered, eyes half-cracked, 'What's this?'

Messalina was too wracked with heaving sobs to reply, having hyperventilated to the point that her short breaths left no room for words.

'Lina, d-darling!' Claudius exclaimed, now fully awake 'Whatever can be the m-matter?' He got no sense from his wife however, who only cried all the harder when he tried to put his arm around her. Eventually, after several minutes of cajoling and calming, Messalina was able to force some words out.

'I - don't want - to worry you - husband' she gasped. 'It's nothing - nothing.'

'How can it be n-nothing, when you're this upset, my l-little one?' the ruler of the known world said lovingly, the remnants of this childhood stutter forcing their way through. The five years he had spent married to Messalina were, by far, the happiest of the fifty-three he had lived.

He brushed the mess of her dark hair back from her face and tried to give his wife the confidence that he felt in her. 'Y-you know you can tell me anything, don't you?'

She nodded mutely, choking back further, aching sobs of pain. 'It's just - just - It's just dreams - that's all - shouldn't even mention -'

'Oh, sweetness -' Claudius cooed. 'If it's just a dream that's w-worrying you, then all will be well!' Her crying became softer as her breathing began to return to normal.

Messalina fixed her large, brimming eyes on her husband's and waited for a tear to form and drop dramatically from her lashes. 'But it's not the first time. I've had the same dream for five nights in a row. That's what's making me so upset.'

'Then t-tell it to me, and we can face it together, wife' he said reassuringly, pulling her closer.

Messalina swallowed hard and plunged in.

'It's because it's about you that I'm worried. Every night, the dream is the same.'

'Go on.'

'It's so silly though, because I know it can't be true.'

'Let me be the judge of that' Claudius said.

'In the dream, I know I'm scared but I can't make my eyes open, all I can do is listen. It starts with a loud banging' the Empress explained. 'Then running footsteps. Then I always hear a scream - your scream - and finally...'

'Finally?' he urged.

'Finally, I manage to force my eyes open and he's standing at the foot of this bed -'

'He?'

'My new father - Appius Silanus.'

'Silanus? Stood here?'

She nodded as a fresh tear made its timely way down her young face. 'And he is holding a sword dripping with blood.'

'My scream, huh?' Claudius said thoughtfully, leaning back against the headboard.

'Every night I pray to the gods to be left in peace, and every night the dream comes again.

That is why my crying has woken you, husband. I'm sorry.'

'Dripping with blood?' he repeated morbidly, his thoughts still a step behind the conversation.

Messalina studied his expression closely.

'Still -' he said brightly a few moments later '- dreams can be t-treacherous things. Nothing is ever straightforward or wh-what it seems to be.'

A tap on the door intervened before Messalina had time to say anything else.

'Enter!' Claudius called out, somewhat relieved, and the room quickly filled with the various household slaves needed to get the day underway. The fire was lit, the curtains pulled, chamber pot removed and clothes laid out in a matter of seconds before Narcissus swept in, his hands clutching the day's business and his eyes inspecting the slaves' work.

'Not the white today, Sabina, take it away and bring back the purple.' The slave bobbed her head and whipped away the offending item. 'Good morning your Majesties!' Narcissus continued cheerfully without breaking stride. 'How did you sleep?'

He lowered his head to inspect his papers, not expecting an actual reply to the question, and when one came he looked up in surprise.

'Not very well I'm afraid, Narcissus.' Claudius inclined his head towards his wife, inviting his freedman to show an appropriate amount of sympathy.

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that your Majesty. Perhaps the Empress can sleep some more this afternoon?'

Messalina burst out sobbing again and Claudius made a displeased face towards his assistant who decided to change the subject and press on awkwardly with business.

'Busy day today, I'm afraid, your Majesty. There's a delegation of exiles from Brittania that have been waiting for an audience for a month now - we should agree our position on that question at least -'

Claudius nodded glumly at the thought. 'I suppose so.'

'And this afternoon is the formal welcome-to-the-family meeting you asked for with Appius Silanus, following his marriage to your mother-in-law.' This prompted a fresh wave of sobbing from the Empress, her head now pressed into her husband's chest.

'Something wrong, Majesty?' Narcissus asked.

'I'm glad you b-brought him up' Claudius said loudly, seizing the moment. 'Perhaps you can help. Tell me, Narcissus - does Silanus strike you as the k-kind of man to be disloyal?'

'Disloyal?' he replied, considering the proposition. 'No, not at all.'

Claudius smiled and squeezed his wife's shoulders with his arm.

'Not ordinarily, at least, your Majesty' Narcissus went on. The Emperor looked up, concerned at the slight change in tone.

'Ordinarily?'

'It's nothing, really. I shouldn't have mentioned it. Let's move on, your Majesty. These Britons are asking for some troubling concessions -'

'No, tell me what you've heard about Silanus' Claudius insisted, his stutter forgotten for the moment. Narcissus paused nervously.

'Fine, but It's important not to overreact -'

'I'll react as I damn please, Narcissus! Spit it out!' the Emperor commanded. Next to him, Messalina's eyes sparkled with intensity.

'Yes, your Majesty. As I said, ordinarily I would have no reason to suspect Silanus of anything. His service for you has been exemplary...'

Narcissus took a deep breath.

'...However since the wedding I've been plagued by a recurring dream that has returned night after night. But It's - it's not something the Empress should have to hear, your Majesty.'

Messalina cut in before her husband could reply for her. 'If my husband can bear it, so can I' she said coldly.

'Go on, Narcissus' Claudius instructed.

'It begins with Silanus and his men forcing open the palace doors. Then there's fighting in the corridors - it's always confused, horrible, bloody' he said, lost in a reverie. 'Then, finally, I flee to this room just in time to see him run you through with his soldier's gladius.' Messalina shrieked and pulled the bedclothes over her head. Even Claudius put his fist to his mouth in horror. 'Anything else?' he trilled.

'Nothing - but I can't get that image out of my head, Majesty - the sword dripping with your blood'.

'Y-yes' the Emperor stuttered. 'It's certainly s-something to occupy the mind.' He slid down the headboard and lay on his back staring at the ceiling.

Messalina's sobs could once again be heard from under the covers but this was not the only sound that entered the room. A dull, repetitive pounding crept into their consciousness, echoing from somewhere deep in the palace below.

'What's that?' Claudius implored. Narcissus snapped his fingers at one of his slaves who sped out of the room to find out.

'This is why I was trying to caution against over-reacting, your Majesty' he said kindly.

'There's no sense in becoming upset by dreams. How could a dream from my head be anything other than my imagination?'

Claudius said nothing, his lame leg twitching rhythmically, eyes locked on the ceiling. Minutes passed during which the pounding continued unrelentingly. Eventually the breathless slave burst back into the room. Claudius sat bolt upright in bed and looked at the man with unconcealed terror. Narcissus remained calm.

'What is going on? Speak slowly and simply, boy.'

'It's Appius Silanus, dominus' the scared slave began. 'He demanded entry, and when the gate guards told him that he wasn't expected until this afternoon, his men killed them!

They're trying to break the doors down, shouting about treachery!'

Narcissus turned to his Emperor, grim faced.

'I apologise for doubting your foresight, Majesty. What are your orders?'

Claudius did not hesitate for an instant. 'Send word to the Praetorian camp! Kill this damned Silanus, kill them all!' he begged, before burying his head under a pillow to block out the thumping.

Messalina's eyes peered out cautiously from below the sheets and met those of Narcissus.

He gave a curt nod of respect for a job well done.

'At once, your Majesty' he replied and left to arrange the execution of the traitor Appius Silanus.

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History has not been kind to Messalina, with the ancient authors full of wild stories about her excesses and cruelty. Their words were probably intended to please the ears of those who eventually triumphed over Messalina and should be read with this in mind. [Suetonius](#) and [Tacitus](#) have lurid and quite adult tales to tell, if you want to read more. In reality, Messalina may have been a significantly more sympathetic figure - a young mother at continual risk, with limited ways in which she could protect her future and doing whatever she needed to survive.

This story is extracted from the forthcoming collection 'Six Nasty, Brutish and Short Stories from Ancient Rome' by Ed McWatt. Find out more at www.edmcwatt.com