

# AN UNORTHODOX SAGE

A Mystery of Ancient Rome

by Peter Mangiaracina



Lucius Aelius Severus was Rome's most infamous pornographer. In the evening five days before the kalends of March, he lay dead in his workshop with a scroll stuffed down his throat. Early that next morning I was summoned to the palace.

"Who would do such a thing?" My slave Agrippa asked. He walked beside me across the forum wiping that gushing fountain of a nose with the hem of his short tunic.

"That, my dear Grip, is what the emperor is surely going to commission me to find out. And use your sleeve," I reminded him for the tenth time that morning. "You're offending the entire forum. Where the blazes is your loincloth?"

"I used it this morning to drain my sinuses."

The day's business was just getting underway. The owners of the market stalls were putting out their wares. Freshly baked breads, roasting meats and garum, that unappetizing fishpickle sauce, filled the forum market place with a legion of smells. Rich and powerful men prowled the forum with their clients in tow, each trying to impress the other with the size of his retinue. I, on the other hand, had no clients, nor was I anyone's client. I preferred the philosopher's life for indeed that's just what I was: Julius Claudius Drusus Antonius, philosopher. The Greeks call me \*Episkopos tes Psiques\*, observer of souls, because of my unique ability to "read" the minds of men. It is a skill I learned from the philosophers of Athens, and one which has brought me much fame and respect in Rome.

"Hey, "Observer!"

A voice called to me from across the forum. One of my fans, no doubt, begging a crumb of attention from the city's favorite philosopher-son. I turned to give him a stately salute: my right hand up, my left hand tucked regally into my toga, my head held high.

"Hey, Observer! Observe this!"

The man turned around, lifted his tunic and flashed me the gibbous moon of his behind. Like my slave, he was not wearing a loincloth.

"Maybe he drained \*his\* sinuses this morning," remarked Agrippa, always one to cushion the blows to my pride.

Not wanting to risk any more displays of unrestrained adulation, or unrestrained anything else for that matter, I hurried to the palace, knowing the emperor, my uncle Claudius, would be anxious to give me an immediate audience.

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I awoke on an uncomfortable bench. I had been waiting for my uncle so long that I fell asleep

despite the cacophony of palace slaves coming in and going out and the heady odor of human excrement. This was the room that housed the palace cistern, the receptacle that received the sacred contents of the emperor's chamber pots. Don't get me wrong. Of course I felt honored to be in the same room as the issue from the emperor's august intestines. I made a mental note to send the emperor a basket of figs in repayment for his consideration. May his bowels forever be as loose as those of the sacred geese. I looked around for Agrippa. He was curled up at my feet, asleep.

Suddenly the door opened. A tall, bent man with an air of self-importance stepped into the room and wrinkled his bumpy nose. His tiny hands, stained with black octopus ink and smudges of rare and expensive purple indigo ink, held several scrolls and a wax tablet.

This was the emperor's freedman with the unlikely name of Narcissus. He called out my name. "Julius Claudius Drusus Antonius! The Emperor will see you now."

I stood up and straightened my best toga and hoped the emperor didn't notice the yellowish brown stain I'd picked up from sitting on the bench. One of the slaves had been a little careless with the cistern while I was asleep, I imagined. After a few words with Agrippa, telling him to stick around and enjoy the ambience till I got back, I followed Narcissus.

We crossed a beautiful mosaic of the nine Muses embedded in the floor of a great reception hall. Narcissus bounced ahead of me on the balls of his feet. Unusual for a tall man. His stoop was more in keeping with his height. Something about the way he walked was oddly familiar. We approached the large oak double doors of my uncle's study. Two spear-bearing praetorian guards dressed in full uniform stood on either side. As we approached, the one on the left leaned his spear against the wall, broke ranks and came over. He patted me down, looking for weapons. There had been several attempts on the emperor's life, and he wasn't taking any chances. The guard went back to his position at the door, taking up his spear again. Narcissus nodded to the guards then rapped three times with one of his scrolls.

"Come," said a muffled voice from within the chamber.

In a perfectly synchronized bit of choreography worthy of the finest Syrian dancing girls, the guards reached for the brass handles on the twin doors and pushed them inward with a swoosh. We stepped inside.

"Narcissus, Chief Secretary of Rome announces Julius Claudius Drusus Antonius to see The emperor Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus ---"

"---this, that, and the other", said a figure hunched over a writing table on the far end of the room. "Yes, yes, Narcissus. I know who you are, I know who he is and by Jupiter's golden doorknob I know who I am. Why can't you just let someone in without making a Greek chorus out of it?"

"As you wish, Caesar," Narcissus bowed and stood firm in the doorway. His right ear was tilted toward the emperor as if he had trouble hearing with the other.

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

"Your instructions, Caesar."

Uncle Claudius diagramed his instructions in the air with his index finger. "Turn to your left. Then turn left again. Then get lost."

"As you wish, Caesar." Narcissus bowed again, turned left twice and went out. Uncle Claudius watched him leave. The Syrian dancing praetorian guards shut the door.

"Pompous rump," said my uncle shaking his head.

"Yes, he is rather a ---"

"Shut up and sit down, idiot."

I hitched up my toga and sat like one befitting my station: left foot bent back under the chair, right foot forward, toga arranged in neat folds across and down my legs.

My uncle regarded me a few seconds the way someone considers a plate of rotting meat. A bit of drool escaped from between his lips, the remnant of a childhood infirmity that left an additional legacy of a limp of the leg, a twitch of the head and a useless right arm. Some, judging only by appearances, had called him a fool, but he had survived all who labeled him thus. Now he was lord of the Roman world.

He reached for a pitcher of wine from a tray on his desk and poured a generous amount into a silver goblet. He never watered his wine, and frequently needed to be borne on the shoulders of his slaves to his cubiculum after dinner.

He offered me the cup. "Here. Taste this."

Surprised by his sudden generosity, I reached for it over the table. "Why, thank you uncle. I am quite the wine connoisseur, you know, capable of distinguishing thirty-seven different varieties of Falernian." I swirled the wine to savor the bouquet. Fruity. Pears and ... almonds? I put the cup to my mouth to take an elegant sip.

"Yes, I'm sure you're quite the connoisseur as you spend the better part of your days in wine shops. But it's not your discriminating palette I require. My tasting slave's not here, and I want to make sure the wine isn't poisoned."

My hand jerked as I stopped the cup at mid-lip and nearly spilled the wine on my toga. I gulped air and felt my Adam's apple take a nose dive. "Um... May I inquire where your tasting slave is?"

"Dead. Something he ate. Drink up."

I looked at my uncle. Then I looked at the goblet. I looked up again and caught the emperor smirking. What could I do? I took a good swallow.

The stomach makes most unusual sounds when you think about it. How easy it is to interpret those sounds as the clarion call of death. Uncle Claudius allowed me those moments of silent observation as he himself observed, elbow on the desk, chin supported by the palm of his hand.

After what seemed like the length of time it took to walk to Gaul, he leaned forward in his chair.

"OK. Your cheeks are still pink. Give me the goblet."

I happily obliged him. He drank the rest of the wine and poured himself what was left in the pitcher. This time he offered me none.

"Let's get down to business." He wiped his lips with a small towel from the wine tray. "I suppose you know why I've called you here today."

*Other than to poison me, you mean?*

That's what I thought. But instead I said, "Yes, sir. And I assure you I will do my best to see the murderer of Lucius Aelius Severus is brought to justice before the feast of Mars next week." My uncle opened his mouth to speak and I raised my hand. "No, no. No need to thank me. I do it for Rome. And for my emperor, of course."

"I don't think it will be necessary for you to investigate," he said, and finished the wine with a gulp. "I already know who did it."

"That was quick... um... Who did it?"

He slammed the goblet down and leaned across the desk. "You, you torch-bearing moron."

"What!? Who, me?" This was too much, even for a stoic.

"Do you deny this accusation?"

"I barely knew the man."

"Are you telling me you don't know Lucius Aelius Severus, the pornographer?"

"That's what I said. What use would I have for a pornographer? I am one of the most sought-after bachelors in Rome. Women gather around me like a shrine to Priapus. I have no need for pornographic promptings." I lifted my strong chin and turned my head to the left, showing the emperor my best side, hoping that Agrippa's less than competent shaving technique hadn't left too much stubble on my supple cheek.

"We'll see about that. Narcissus is due back shortly with something that might be of interest to you."

Opportunity presented herself like a fat lyre stroker at a banquet. I jumped up and crossed the room in five wide and measured strides. I stood to one side of the double doors with my hand on the brass handle and declaimed in a dramatic voice worthy of the great Greek actor Mnestor :

"No need to await the return of Narcissus for he has never left!"

Wishing for the accompaniment of a fanfare, I pulled the door open and the chief secretary fell into the room, scattering his papers and scrolls. By all the gods, I am too good! Claudius jumped out of his chair sending the tray and the wine pitcher flying.

"Narcissus!" he boomed.

"At your command, Caesar," said Narcissus, face-down on the marble floor. The wine pitcher finished its trajectory and landed on his head, giving off a lovely, round tone. Good silver. I must remember to ask my uncle where he got it. Such a fine item would look good in my study next to that statue of me I had done in Athens last summer.

Neither I nor the emperor made a move to help Narcissus, who got to his feet shakily and gathered up his papers. If he hadn't been so full of himself, I might have felt sorry for him. Modesty is a Roman virtue, you know.

"Give me those papers I asked you for. And stop weaving about like a dancing boy at a bacchanal. You're making me dizzy."

"I'll try, Caesar." He bobbed and weaved toward the emperor, who had sat down again. The chief secretary placed several documents on his desk.

"Now pick up the silverware and go away. And this time, make it further than the threshold. I'll speak to you about this later. Right now I've got more important nuts to fry."

Narcissus nodded, an act which he repented judging from the wince that gripped his face like an eagle's talon. He gathered the pitcher, the tray, the small face towel and his dignity and bobbed to the door, trying several times to grasp the handle. He finally called out to the guards. They opened the door and he lurched out.

Claudius looked at me with a hooded brow and asked me in a whisper, "Is he still listening?"

"Nope. And he probably won't be for at least a few days."

"Spies. Everywhere spies." He shook his head, leaned back and lifted his wine cup. Realizing it was empty, he turned it around a few times and placed it carefully back on the table. He shifted in his chair, wiped some spittle from his chin and mumbled to himself as if considering whether or not to ask the question. Then he said, "OK. How'd you do it?"

"I'm glad you asked me that. May I be seated?" Claudius motioned to the chair. I sat, taking the time to arrange my toga. This time I read only impatience in the emperor's face. And perhaps a little respect? He had forgotten the papers on his desk for the moment, for which I was grateful.

"The Greeks have a method of determining the soul of an individual by observing his comportment. How a man grows into his body and face is directly related to the mandates his soul has given him along his life. The Greeks have called this 'psyche loggia', knowledge of the soul. This is what I have studied in Athens and this is why I am called 'the Observer'."

"That sounds very interesting but what does it have to do with knowing Narcissus was eavesdropping?"

"It's quite simple, really. Narcissus is a tall man, but he walks like a short one. A short man lifts himself higher when he walks. I reason this is because he wants to feel even taller and thereby more important. We can deduce that to be important in the palace means being privy to all the information one can get one's hands on. Information is a priceless commodity in Rome. Couple that with the fact that he stoops and cocks his right ear while listening, which indicates a penchant for gleaning information crouched outside closed doors. He's probably got the guards bribed as well to make it easier. Based on those observations, the fact that he was listening to our conversation was a foregone conclusion."

The emperor stood up and limped to a bust of Augustus on the far side of the room. He stared at it a moment with his back to me, perhaps asking advice of the god. What a great-looking tunic he had on! It'd look better on me, though, I mused. I've got the physical proportions to carry it off. I scratched the stain on my toga. I couldn't go out into the forum looking like this! I held the offending material up to my nose. Well, at least it didn't smell too bad.

The emperor turned around while I was sniffing my toga. He winced in disgust.

"A parlor trick!" He limped back to his desk. "A decadent Greek parlor trick, that's all it is. This is how you spent the money I gave you for your education?"

"Well, not only that. I took dancing lessons, too."

Claudius sat down and covered his face with his hands. I took the opportunity to sniff my toga one

last time and pronounced it passable should a fine young Roman woman choose to launch herself at me on the way home. It was a tiny blemish on an otherwise flawless masculine presentation.

Claudius rubbed his face and studied the papers on his desk. He hadn't forgotten them. By Jupiter's varnished testicles, if I get out of this I'm going to sacrifice three white oxen to the goddess Fortuna. That's if the emperor doesn't string me up by my penis maximus first.

He unfurled a scroll of fine hieratica papyrus. Attached at the ends was a broken seal. The astrological sign of Pisces, two fish arranged head to tail, was embedded in the wax. On closer examination the fish turned out to be a naked man and woman arranged head to pubis.

"I hope you can dance your way out of this one, Julius Claudius." He held up the papyrus and pointed to an illustration drawn in ink. "Can you tell me what this is?"

I studied the picture. "Why, it looks like a very well-executed drawing of a Minotaur buggering a senator, sir"

"Yes. That's what it looks like to me, too." He wagged a finger at the figure in the toga. "Take a close look at the senator. Doesn't he look a little familiar?"

I stifled a groan. "Yes. He does, kind of." I knew I was caught.

Claudius slapped the table with the palm of his hand. "Cut the crap, Julius Claudius. That's your slave Agrippa."

I got closer and squinted my eyes. I tilted my head to the left and right. "By Neptune's scaly elbow, now that you mention it, it does look like Agrippa. What detail! He even got the runny nose in there."

"I have here a document. It is a commission for one illustration of a Minotaur raping a senator. It is addressed to Lucius Aelius. It is signed by you. What manner of perversion does this represent?"

"It's all very innocent, really."

"You call getting butt-fucked by a mythical beast 'innocent'?"

"It's a political satire."

"A what?"

"Political satire. The senator represents Rome and the Minotaur represents, well, here, can't you see what he's wearing? It's the imperial seal there, that big ring on the Minotaur's finger."

"So that's supposed to be me there sticking my imperial member in your slave's hindquarters? Have you lost your mind? I could have you dragged through Rome on hooks and thrown down the Gemonian stairs for this."

I was flattered. That fate was only reserved for powerful men who had fallen. Still, it had to hurt \*a lot\*.

"No, no. You don't understand," I said.

"You're damned right, I don't understand!" He yelled back.

"It's symbolic of how the emperor takes what he wants from Rome. How he rapes the senate and people. It's the \*concept\* of 'emperor', not you. It's nothing personal. "

"Nephew, it doesn't get any more personal than this."

"It wasn't meant to be published in Rome." Despite my training in philosophical detachment, I felt myself beginning to whine like an Egyptian crone at a fish market. "It was an illustration for a

philosophical paper on politics I was writing in Greek for publication only in Greece. I meant no harm to you personally!”

“Be that as it may, it is treasonable. I could have your slave crucified for this.”

“I had to have someone to pose for the senator. Would you have me ask a real senator to do it? Lucius Aelius always insisted on working only from live models.”

“If he had to work from live models, where’d he get the Minotaur? A hunting expedition in a Cretan labyrinth?”

“No. Agrippa told me that they slaughtered a bull and stuck the head on Lucius Aelius’ son.”

He tried to hold back a smile, but failed. Then he chuckled, looking closely at the photograph. “They weren’t really...um...”

“No, no!” I shook my head. “It’s just a simulation.”

“Yes. A simulation. I certainly hope so.” He put the illustration down on the desk. “Well, it is quite ingenious. ‘Political Illustration’. Is that a creation of yours?”

“Sadly, no. Like all good ideas, it’s Greek.”

Tension lifted from the room like a dense fog from a Celtic forest. I might just “dance” my way out of this yet. Add that to my long list of philosophical skills. Julius Claudius, the Mollifier. But then the emperor frowned again. He sifted through the documents and chose another papyrus note.

“This is in your hand, too. And it has your signature. It’s dated two days ago and was found in the scroll forced down Lucius Aelius’ throat.”

The emperor read:

\*“From I. Claudius Drusus Antonius, citizen of Rome, philosopher, and nephew of the emperor

To Lucius Aelius Severus, citizen of Rome, pornographer, and pain in my ass

Citizen Lucius Aelius,

I have received your note demanding an additional three hundred sesterces for the illustration I commissioned on the nones of February. Your threat to show the original request and the illustration to the emperor if payment is not received by tomorrow had me laughing so hard that I popped a strap on my lovely new Spanish sandals.

You are forgetting who you’re dealing with. My uncle and I are as close as two asparagus stalks wrapped in a grape leaf. Please deliver my illustration immediately, as the publication I need it for draws ever nearer. If you don’t, I’ll come down there personally and make you eat your words.

Yours,

Julius Claudius Drusus Antonius, the Totally Miffed”\*

After a few seconds of silence he repeated, “I’ll make you eat your words.”

He put down the note and squeezed his eyes with forefinger and thumb.

“Julius Claudius. I will ask you once. Did you murder Lucius Aelius Severus, a citizen of Rome?”

I looked him straight in the eye. “No, sir. I did not.”

He looked \*me\* straight in the eye. "That is extremely difficult to believe considering this evidence. Since you got back from Greece last July, you have caused me and my family a lot of embarrassment with your egotism, your preening, your Greek intellectual arrogance and your unorthodox behavior. And now this."

"But I didn't do it, uncle! Just give me a few days and I'll find out who did. I promise!"

"No. I'm not going to have you traipsing around Rome making a bigger fool of yourself than you already have. I want you on the next boat that passes by Pandataria. It sails in two days."

"Pandataria! Uncle Claudius, you can walk around that island in an hour! I'll die of boredom there."

"Then you'll have to find new ways to hone your observation skills, though in one month you'll probably know every single rock down to its tiniest crag. Julius Claudius Drusus Antonius, you are hereby banished from Rome. For life."

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Julia, Augustus' daughter, had been banished to Pandataria for sexual misconduct. Tiberius, Augustus' successor, had banished Agrippina there on feeble grounds that she was involved in conspiracy against him. There they had died, probably of boredom. But I am made of finer material. My mind is a superbly tuned instrument, capable of withstanding the mental anguish of isolation for a lifetime. My body is a tribute to Hercules and ever prepared to undertake the most brutal of labors. My courage in the face of adversity is the stuff of an epic poem worthy of Homer. But how in Hades was I going to get a decent pedicure? What was I supposed to do, file my toenails on a rock?

The unspeakable horror of substandard toiletries on an island the size of a dwarf's breakfast nook made me queasy. I leaned against a statue of a woman putting on a sandal and retched before continuing along the endless passageway. As I entered the palace atrium I realized had made the wrong turn on my way to pick up my slave Agrippa. When I left my uncle's study, Narcissus was not there to escort me out, and the guard at the door half-heartedly pointed me in the direction of the slave's dressing room. As I was not a frequent visitor to the palace, I had gotten lost in scores of passageways adorned with statues.

The atrium was cavernous. An opening in the center of the ceiling let in the late morning light and revealed a swatch of cerulean blue sky. Beneath the opening was a beautiful fountain set in a white pool of pitted stone. Marble nymphs and satyrs frolicked near the outer rim, and a large, bearded Bacchus in its center poured water from an amphora he held on his shoulder.

There, sitting on the edge of the fountain, was the emperor's wife, Messalina. She was locked in an embrace with a senator. I could see a broad purple stripe on his toga, the mark of his office. Their tongues, like swords, played gladiator games as the senator's large hands moved beneath Messalina's flimsy purple gown.

Suddenly he pushed her away and got up, shaking his head. She reached for him again but he took her firmly by the upper arms and sat her down. The gasp that escaped me when I saw his face was a little too loud, and they both turned toward the sound. I ducked behind a column to avoid being seen and they turned their attention back to each other.

Messalina had been wrapped in an embrace with Appius Silanus, her step father. He had recently been recalled from Spain to take part in Claudius' government here. Just a few months ago he had married Domitia Lepida, Messalina's mother.

Silanus reached into his toga and pulled out a rolled papyrus and handed it to Messalina. She began to cry. He stood there a few moments and watched her. When she looked up at him again with tears in her eyes, he turned on his heels and left through an opening on the other side of the atrium.

Messalina's stopped crying as quickly as an actor sheds a mask. She placed the papyrus next to her and covered it with a bandana she had been wearing around her neck. She looked toward the

column I was standing behind.

"You can come out now, Julius Claudius."

Befuddled, I stepped from behind the column. "How did you know I was here, Lady Messalina?"

"No one could mistake the fragrance of crushed violets and the odor of noxious self assurance that always precedes you, my dear Julius Claudius Drusus Antonius, the 'Perverser'."

"That's The \*Observer\*, Lady"

"After that Minotaur drawing I saw last night, you'll always be the 'Perverser' to me, my little nephew."

"Perverser than who?" I offered. "Certainly not 'perverser' than you. And stop calling me 'my little nephew'. You're younger than I am.

"Come closer, Julius Claudius, into the light, and let me see you."

I moved from the shadowed columns to the illuminated fountain and stood in front of Messalina. She was the most beautiful woman in Rome. Her voluptuous body had been sculpted from the finest translucent white marble by some ancient Etruscan god of fertility. Her pampered black hair was piled on her head in so many tiers it would take a machine designed by the old Greek engineer, Archimedes, to climb to the top. Her teeth were dazzling white, no doubt from the powdered horn she enameled her teeth with every morning. Her face, with sensuous, pouting lips and cruel, lascivious eyes, could make every muscle in your body throb in time with the quickening rhythm of your heart. She was, in short, a female version of me.

It was dangerous for all the men in Rome who desired the emperor's wife, but it was far more dangerous for them that she in turn fulfilled most of their desires. She had amassed great power from her marriage to the emperor and she used it to win lovers, crush her enemies and amass even more power.

I wanted to be neither her lover nor her enemy, but I couldn't help my reaction to seeing her in her transparent robes.

"Is that a scroll beneath your toga, or are you just glad to see me, nephew?"

"Actually, \*aunt\* Messalina, it is, in fact, a scroll," I lied, while trying to mentally curb the eager dog of my manhood straining at its shackles.

"Hmm. And rather a large roll it is. Take it out. Let me see it."

I pointed at the papyrus at her side that she had covered by the bandana "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"Oh, this. Nothing of interest to you. However, your volume is of great interest to me." She fixed me with her green eyes, rimmed in fine charcoal and shaded with wine lees.

"Messalina, nothing would please me more than to give you a private reading, for old time's sake. But two years is a long time, and much has changed since then."

"Not all that much, perverser." She leaned back against a naked nymph that seemed to have been frozen as it stepped from the fountain. Messalina's nipples strained against the diaphanous fabric of her purple gown, threatening to pop out. My teachers would be proud of my self-control, but it was all I could do to keep my unruly hound from jumping out and barking.

"I am still the same woman I was when you left for Greece, am I not?" Her right hand played in the water while the left went behind her head.

"The same woman, perhaps." One of her breasts finally hopped out of her robes. I couldn't look away. "And perhaps even more formidable. But not of the same status."

"And when have you ever let such a minor thing as status keep you from giving a private reading to desirable young women of letters?" She took some of the water from the pool, sprinkled it between her breasts, and let the rivulets cascade downward until they disappeared under her gown. The barking became a howl.

"Since the status you refer to involves your elevation to empress by marriage to my uncle."

She dismissed this with a wave of her hand. "My marriage changes nothing. Claudius is an old man. He cannot satisfy me. He allows me my diversions." She pulled her robes together, sat upright again and crossed her legs. Part of me was disappointed.

"I can't be made to believe any of that. He has given you a daughter and a son, Messalina. You must have obtained at least some satisfaction from him."

She crossed her arms under her bosom and turned away, "And who said they are his children?" She turned back, waiting for my reaction. Like an actor, she loved to shock her audience.

"Please, Messalina. I have enough trouble right now. I don't want to be privy to that kind of information."

"You know what I think? I think those two years in Greece changed your orientation. I have a delicious slave boy who I am sure would just love to play Minotaur games with you."

"I'm afraid the games I play would be a little tame for your jaded tastes, Messalina."

I remembered something she had said earlier. "When did you say you had seen the drawing?"

"What drawing?" She drew the covered papyrus closer to her.

"My political satire."

"Political satire?" She laughed.

"My Minotaur drawing. You said you saw it last night"

"I did not. How could I have seen it last night? It was brought to the palace early this morning."

"Messalina, something is going on around here and I'm going to find out what it is."

She stood up and faced me. She was so close I felt her eyes brand anger into my skin. "I recommend, Julius Claudius, that you accept your fate and go off to your island. I had to plead with the emperor on your behalf not to feed you to the lions. Go home and pack. Be done with it."

A histrionic sweep of her arm emphasized her point and the light bandana rippled to reveal the papyrus. It was a fine grade, hieratica, made from the center of the papyrus pith. The sign of Pisces was pressed into the unbroken wax seal.

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I flew from the atrium on Mercury's wings, leaving Messalina for the next hapless audience that stumbled into the atrium. Now that I had seen the Pisces seal, I knew that somehow Messalina, as well as Appius Silanus, was involved in the murder of the pornographer. Or at least in framing me.

With a little backtracking, I located the cistern room. Just in time. Agrippa was swooning. He had spent too much time around malodorous vapors. So had I.

We left the palace and walked further up the Palatine hill to the house of Lucius Aelius. I had to find out exactly what had happened the night before. It was the key to my salvation. Surely if I could present the emperor with the truth, I would be saved from exile. But then again, if it involved Messalina, as I suspected, it could even get worse for me.

The domus of Lucius Aelius Severus had once belonged to Milo, one of Pompey's thugs and murderer of one of my ancestors, Publius Clodius, a favorite of Julius Caesar. The divine Julius was another ancestor. Scratch a patrician and you'll find another patrician's bloodline. Scratch some more, as I was fond of boasting to the Greeks, and you'll find a god.

The pornographer's house had a six-foot tufa perimeter wall that ran around all sides and a carved oak portal that portrayed Lucius Aelius' peculiar interpretation of the sign of Pisces. Pushing the heavy gate open was a task for both Agrippa and me, while all the time I attempted to keep my best toga from further mottling. We walked up a narrow path lined with bare Phoenician rose bushes. A large stone fountain against the perimeter wall was ringed with Smyrniom, considered a plant of ill-omen by the Greeks and frequently used in their funeral ceremonies. Nevertheless, I found it quite tasty as an ingredient in my much-acclaimed meat sauce. I shook my head sadly. Another of life's pleasures denied me if I wound up on Pandataria.

A cypress branch hung on the door, the traditional sign of family mourning. I lifted a lion's head brass knocker and let it fall. A teenage slave boy answered. His dense blond hair and thick accent betrayed Germanic origins. Crimson lipstick and kohl-shaded eyelids betrayed his proclivities. I simply told him that I had come to pay my respects to the dearly departed. As the custom was to admit all comers in time of mourning, he stepped aside and allowed us to enter.

"The master will be with you in a moment." He showed us into a small anteroom and curtsied like a serving girl, then disappeared into the recesses of the domus. Elegantly, if not very practically shaped porphyry jars lined wooden shelves mounted on white stucco walls. I found a seat on a marble bench and admired a floor mosaic portraying a chariot race. I looked over at Agrippa who paced across the wild-eyed chariot horses.

"What are you so nervous about?"

"I don't like being in this place very much." He made a move to lift the hem of his tunic but thought better of it and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"Why not?" I looked around. "It seems rather nice to me." I had sent Agrippa with my instructions for the illustration and ordered him to comply with the suggestion that he model for Lucius Aelius, but I had never been to the domus before that day. All of my correspondence with the pornographer had been by message. I had not lied to the emperor when I said I didn't know the man.

"Certainly such a beautiful house couldn't make you nervous. Is it Lucius Aelius? He's dead now. No need to be afraid of him."

"His son makes me nervous, not him."

"Why is that? I chuckled. "If the Minotaur illustration is any indication, he seemed to have liked you very much."

"That," he said, wagging his index finger in the air, "is what I'm nervous about."

A minor earthquake rattled the porphyry jars. Agrippa hid behind me. A giant lumbered into the room. He was tall and broad shouldered with strong arms, thick legs and a wide chest. A bear fur tunic hung off one shoulder. He was a statue of Hercules, except for one thing: The sculptor must have chiseled the head in the dark. It was only the size of a child's, crowned by a skimpy patch of ratty brown hair. His face had the permanent look of one who has just been asked a difficult rhetorical question. The bull's head had been an improvement on the one that habitually occupied the top of his thick neck.

“Who are you?” The giant knob-head asked. His sound of his voice was flat and raspy, like a quack.

“I am Julius Claudius and this is my slave Agrippa. I believe you two have met.”

I pulled Agrippa out from behind me and a spasm contorted the giant’s face into a smile.

“Oh! It’s Grippy. Grippy, it’s good to see you again.” He jumped up and down and clapped his hands. Mosaic stones crackled, porphyry jars clanked.

“We are here to pay respects to your father and to ask you a few questions, Lucius Aelius —“

“Call me ‘Atuchêma’,” he said proudly but solemnly. “That’s what my father called me.”

“Ah. Atuchêma.” I searched my recent memory for the meaning of the word. “Would he have been shaking his head sadly while calling you that?”

“Yes, yes,” he answered wide-eyed. “How did you know?”

“Just a wild guess,” I said. \*Atuchêma\* is the Greek word for “mistake”, especially one due to ignorance. Apparently Lucius Aelius allowed himself a private lament at his misfortune for siring this monster. Still, he seemed a gentle beast despite his freakish appearance and odd duck-like voice.

“Well, Atuchêma, I imagine your father is still laid out in the atrium?”

“Yes. I’ll take you to him now.”

The atrium doubled as Lucius Aelius’ private showcase of erotic art. A statue of a chubby Priapus sporting a yard-long stone phallus greeted us at the door. Agrippa and I sidestepped it daintily, but Atuchêma patted its massive organ as if it were a pet. Agrippa shuddered and dogged my steps. I looked up at walls painted with a dozen huge frescoes, each representing one of love’s many physical permutations. I had tried a few of them, but many required acrobatic skills beyond even my considerable athletic capabilities.

Lucius Aelius’ funeral bier was set up near a white marble column at the far end of the atrium. Myrrh tickled the hair in my nostrils. I moved closer. A score of oil lamps hung on iron stands around the atrium lit up the room. The better to show off the works of art, but it also allowed me to examine the body in detail. The elder Lucius Aelius wore a belted grey tunic with a grape cluster motif border around the neck opening. The eyes had been closed. A coin, the customary fare for the ferryman who would take him across the river Styx, stuck out of his gaping mouth. He had been a slightly built man. The only resemblance to the son was the face and the thick neck. Could Atuchêma have inherited his body from his mother? Ye gods. I examined his mouth where the scroll had been introduced. Some of the teeth had been broken and his tongue had been forced down his throat. Then I saw the marks on the neck.

A large, mottled bruise appeared at the base of the throat and smaller ones all the way around the back.

“Atuchêma. Have you seen these marks?”

He moved closer and squinted. “Yes. I have seen them.”

“When did you first notice them?”

He reached under his tunic and scratched. “When I found him in the studio before daybreak.”

“Where is the studio?”

“At the far end of the house near the garden.”  
“Can you take us there now?”

“Okay. Can Grippy come with us?” He looked over at my young slave and licked his lips. Agrippa, who was still trying to take cover behind me, whimpered. I poked him with my elbow.

I could see the perimeter wall on the right as we walked across a well-tended peristyle garden. Several geese waddled by and honked at our intrusion. A statue of a large woman with a tiny head reclined on a plinth at one corner of the garden. She was locked in an amorous embrace with a duck. Atuchêma lifted a hairy arm and pointed to the sculpture.

“Mama,” he quacked. Agrippa reached out and clutched my arm.

An open archway led into a large studio that smelled of squid ink and emulsifier. A large cabinet held several crude jars of what I assumed to be inks, and a rack of styli in a progressive range of thicknesses. Scroll containers were arranged in cubicles on a unit built to cover one wall. One large table was situated in the center of the room. Despite a carefully propped-open scroll here and there on a bench, the studio was obsessively neat. After an hour’s joust with my stylus I was usually wont to find myself and my immediate surroundings dappled with ink. Lucius Aelius obviously prided himself on cleanliness.

“Where exactly did you find him?”

“Right here.” He walked over to the large work table. “He was laying face up with a scroll in his mouth.”

“Do you still have that scroll?”

“Yes. I uh ...” He looked around a few seconds then tapped his tiny forehead in a gesture of recall. “I put it back on the shelf this morning.” He stomped over to the scroll rack and pulled down an expensive papyrus roll with large ebony handles. He stared at it a moment, deciding if it was the right one, then nodded to himself and handed it over.

I only had to read two words before I realized I held a copy of Cato’s treatise on farming. It was full of republican virtue and so boring that having a slave read it to you while you touselled with your loved one was a sure way to delay a climax. Other than it being monumentally out of place in the library of a pornographer, I could see nothing special about it. Until I rewound the scroll and saw the smudges on the outside.

“May I see the inks your father used?”

He showed me the cupboard where his father kept his drawing supplies. There were fifteen jars, each holding squid inks with more or less water to achieve different shades of black. I looked at the illustrations laid out on the benches. All of them drawn with the same black fluid.

“Did your father keep ink anywhere else?”

“No. He never took it out of the studio. Once, when I was a child, I took a bottle to my room to draw and he got very angry.” He looked down at the floor as if he were still ashamed.

“You said that you found your father just before daybreak this morning. Did you see or hear anything unusual when you came into the room?”

Atuchêma searched his memory. “No. Nothing unusual in the studio.”

“What about outside? You can see into the street beyond the wall from the studio. Was there anyone out there?”

“Yes.” He nodded his head and grinned. “I saw a man on a horse trot by on the other side of the wall.”

“Do you mean on the other side of the street?”

“No. On this side of the street, right near the wall. Actually, I only saw his head going up and down.”

“Did you hear anything?”

“No. It was very quiet.”

I looked at the wall that surrounded the property and suddenly I knew exactly who had murdered Lucius Aelius Severus.

“Thank you for your help, Atuchêma. I have to go now. I have some pressing business elsewhere. Come along Agrippa.”

“Wait,” the giant said. “Can Agrippa stay here for a while and play?”

One look at Agrippa’s face gave me Atuchêma’s definition of play. I decided that particular fate was better suited to an emperor than my slave. I declined the invitation for Agrippa, which greatly disappointed the giant but won the undying gratitude of a very nervous slave.

I sent Agrippa home. I told him he should have the cook make me some soup, heavy on the Smyrniom. Seeing all that growth around Lucius Aelius’s fountain had made me hungry. Even contemplation on Atuchêma’s parentage could not quell it.

The praetorian guard at the front door of the palace had a red beard. Not only did it serve as insulation for his cheeks against a seasonably chilly afternoon, but also as a repository for breakfast leftovers. They clung to his frizzle with a tenacity worthy of Hannibal scaling the Alps. He summoned a messenger to petition the emperor for an audience on my behalf. The slave, of the Gaulish variety, returned with the news that the emperor was in a meeting with Appius Silanus, discussing plans for a new port at Ostia. Narcissus was available, however, if I’d care to speak to him. I said that would be just fine, and he escorted me to his office.

Where Claudius’s \*tablinum\* was quietly elegant, Narcissus’s was shockingly ostentatious. If an article had enough surface area to hold gold plating, it was plated: Tables, chairs, scroll containers, writing implements and wax tablets. Even the busts of dead Romans that dotted the spacious room like fireflies in a cavern had a layer of precious ore, and had been buffed to an eye-searing sheen. Expensive rugs and wall hangings left no surface bare. Their porous nature had probably saved them from a good slathering of liquid gold. I shielded my eyes, shook my head. My uncle’s reliance on the chief secretary had made the freedman rich, and he was determined that everyone knew it.

Narcissus was at the center of the room at his desk, reading a scroll at nose-length.

“You really ought to cut the glare in this room,” I advised him. “You’ll ruin your eyes.”

He looked up. His eyes were red from too much reading. “They’re already ruined. Occupational hazard. Too many years as a clerk.” He put down the scroll. “What can I do for you, Julius Claudius? I’m very busy. Shouldn’t you be off packing?”

I sat down on the other side of his desk. I didn’t bother to arrange my toga. I was among the criminal class. “Are you trying to get rid of me, Narcissus?”

“In a word: Yes. If I were you, I wouldn’t defy the emperor’s orders.”

“And if I were you, Narcissus, I would be a sneaky little hopping lizard with more self-importance than brains.”

Narcissus snorted. “Look who’s talking about self importance!”

"Keep it up, Narcissus." I blew on my nails and buffed them on my toga. "I'm just going to enjoy it more when they heave your broken body off the Tarpeian rock."

"Now why ever would they do that?" He said, amused.

I dropped my hand in my lap. "Because you murdered Lucius Aelius Severus."

He laughed out loud. "By the great hairy bean-bag of Bacchus, man! Whatever gave you that idea?"

"From your hands."

"My hands?" He studied them. "Are you a palm-reader now, Julius Claudius?"

"If I were, I'm sure I'd remark on your shorter-than-average life-line."

"Are you implying it was I who strangled him?"

"Who said he was strangled, Narcissus? I thought the official take on it was that he gagged on Cato the Elder. Not exceptional, as I've choked on that tiresome bugger as well. And now you tell me he was strangled."

"You don't know what you're talking about. And it's better if you keep it that way."

"I know from the marks on Lucius Aelius's neck that he was indeed strangled. I also know that your fingers are purple." I reached across the littered desk and grabbed his ink-stained fingers.

He jerked his hand away. "So is the stripe on your toga."

"Perhaps. The only difference is my stripe isn't on the scroll found in Lucius Aelius' mouth, whereas your fingerprints are."

He snorted again. It was getting on my nerves. "Proving what?"

"Proving you rammed that scroll down his throat. I found smudges of indigo ink on it."

"Oh, please." He squirmed. I rearranged the folds of my toga. It annoyed Claudius, no reason it shouldn't drive his freedman a little crazy. "Lucius Aelius used ink. They were probably his fingerprints."

"Nope. There was no indigo to be found. Besides, all of his illustrations are done in squid ink. It's cheaper and dries quicker."

"That's a little thin for an accusation, Julius Claudius."

"Not many people use indigo, Narcissus." I looked around the overly-appointed room. "Only a rich man --- a demonstrably rich man with royal purple pretensions --- or a palace chief secretary could afford it."

He rolled his eyes. "Not even Cicero in his prime could have convicted me on that evidence."

"That's not all. There was also the sighting of a man on a horse trotting by on the other side of the domus wall soon after the murder."

"Well, even if that was the murderer, it certainly wasn't me. I travel by litter, and my loathing of horses is common knowledge. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got some papers for the emperor to sign and you have a boat to oblivion to catch." He got up and gathered some scrolls.

"Not so fast! Sit down, Narcissus."

He started to protest, but gave up and plopped himself down.

"A curious thing about a horseman going by on the other side of the wall: It's only six feet high. If a man were on a horse, his whole body would clear the top of the wall, yet Lucius Aelius's son says he only saw the head bobbing up and down. He didn't even hear the horse clomping, which would have been quite audible from where he was standing. What he really saw was a man about six feet tall who has a singular way of bouncing when he walks. What he saw, Narcissus, was you walking by."

"I've never heard anything so ridiculous in my life."

"Well." I sighed and got up, slapping my thighs. "I suppose I'll just have to go to the emperor with my story and see if he is of the same opinion." I bounced to the door in a perfect imitation of Narcissus.

"Wait!"

I turned with a smile. "Yes, chief secretary?"

"Going to the emperor with this won't do us any good, Julius Claudius."

"Speak for yourself. I'm looking at a lifetime of tossing pebbles into the sea. Tell me I'm not desperate to try anything."

He rubbed his fingers together, but purple ink and guilt are not so easily scrubbed away.

"Sit down, Julius Claudius. Have some wine." He reached for a pitcher on a small end table near the desk.

"Oh, no. The emperor already pulled that one on me. Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Just be quiet and listen."

I sat down and hooked my arm over the back of the chair. "Okay. Let the javelins fly."

"I did not kill Lucius Aelius."

"Yes, I know. Your hands are too small to have gone all the way around his neck."

Narcissus furrowed his brow. If looks were arrows, I'd be a bull's-eye.

"But you were there," I added. "And you put my message to Lucius Aelius in the scroll and then forced it down his throat."

He lowered his eyes and nodded his head. "Yes. And I'm not proud of it, either. But I was just following orders."

"Whose orders, Narcissus? Certainly not the emperor's. He may not like me, but I'm his sister's son."

"No, not the emperor; in fact, everything I've done has been to protect the emperor."

"From what?"

Narcissus rubbed his fingers again. "The emperor rules the empire. But Valeria Messalina rules the emperor. He's so blind with devotion to her that he can't see that she is sweeping the empire out from under him."

"Why don't you tell him?"

"Ha! He wouldn't believe me. And when Messalina found out I'd probably wind up like Lucius Aelius. Jupiter, Julius Claudius, she's slept with three-quarters of the praetorian guard and nearly all of the senators!"

"She's slept with Publius Gracchus?" He was a corpulent septuagenarian, one of the oldest barely-living members of that august body.

He bowed his head. "For Messalina sex is just a means to control men."

I unhooked my arm from the back of the chair and leaned forward. "Have \*you\* slept with her, Narcissus?"

He got up and put his hands behind his back, his eyes trained on the ceiling. Yes. And I'm not proud of \*that\*, either." He shook his head.

"Don't worry, Narcissus. It doesn't seem to me you had too much pride to begin with. Answer me this: Why was there such a hubbub, anyway? Lucius Aelius is a pornographer. In his letter to me he said he was going to show my request to the emperor. It sounded as if he had a special relationship with him."

"Lucius Aelius was a spy for the emperor. He reported to me all the goings on in Rome from his, um, unique perspective. Trouble is he got a bit frisky and went into business for himself."

"The blackmail business."

"Yes. But then he ran into Messalina."

"She didn't know he was a spy?"

"She does now, but at that time she hadn't gotten around to seducing that information out of me."

"When did she find out?"

"After her lover of the moment, Appius Silanus, strangled him."

I remembered the scroll Appius Silanus had given Messalina when I encountered them in the palace atrium. I had seen Lucius Aelius' signature seal of Pisces. "So Lucius Aelius tried to blackmail Messalina, and I suppose Appius Silanus. Messalina had probably wanted a memento of her relationship with Silanus and they went to the pornographer's domus to model for him.

"That's correct," said Narcissus, rubbing his bumpy nose.

"Now I know why Lucius Aelius insisted on live models. If he had that reputation in Rome no one would doubt the authenticity of an illustration if a victim defaulted on payment."

"You're smarter than I thought. When Messalina received Lucius Aelius's message demanding money, she called me in and I was forced to tell her. She then told Appius Silanus. Silanus had just managed to release himself from her carnal choke-hold, so he wasn't in the least bit pleased that a dirty picture of him diddling Messalina was about to be tacked up on the rostra for all of Rome to gawk at. So he went to see the pornographer. And when Lucius Aelius didn't give him what he wanted, he strangled him and took it."

“And where do you come into this?”

“Right after it was done, Silanus told Messalina. She called me in and demanded that I help her cover up the murder. What was I to do?”

“I know, I know. You’re not proud of \*that\*, either.”

Narcissus shot arrows from his eyes again, but his quiver was nearly empty. He sat down and sighed. “Silanus found a scroll container which included an impressive list of clients and all correspondences between them and Lucius Aelius. You seemed the most promising for the role of scapegoat. I was immediately sent to Lucius Aelius’s domus to find your illustration and to set the scene.”

That explained why Messalina had seen my scroll before daybreak. “You couldn’t find anyone else in that impressive list to condemn?”

“You condemned yourself with your own arrogance. When I read that line, ‘I’ll make you eat your words’, I saw both motive and method.”

Now \*I\* snorted. “Well, you could have at least chosen a piece of literature a bit more indicative of my superior taste than Cato! I’m surprised the emperor believed it.”

“I was in a hurry. Apparently Lucius Aelius had been studying it when Silanus sneaked in. It was still rolled out on the desk when I got there.”

I smiled at the contrasting nature of Lucius Aelius. Publicly reviled for his work. Privately he read and mused over the virtues of a pious Roman life in the dead of night. There was so much I wanted and needed to learn about the human soul. But it was impossible to achieve that aim alone on an island. Whom would I have to study but myself? I would go mad reflecting on my own perfection, and therefore no longer be perfect ... You’ve got to love my philosophical acumen.

“How do I get out of this, Narcissus?”

“I’m afraid there is no way out. The dye is cast. Messalina has Claudius wrapped around her finger and Appius Silanus has already worked his way into the emperor’s confidence as his partner in the harbor project and, not to mention, a member of his own family as husband to Messalina’s mother.”

“What you’re saying is I’m screwed.”

“For now, yes. Until I can find a way to tell Claudius without having a full-scale riot on my hands. That’s if Claudius even believed me, which I doubted he would. Then Messalina could set a course of action in motion that would overturn Claudius’s rule. She may even be plotting it at this moment with whomever is her lover, now that Appius Silanus has managed to break free.”

“Hmm,” I pondered. “I’m surprised she let him get away.”

A slave burst into the room. He breathed heavily and sweat streamed down his ebony forehead. He bent forward and put his hands on his knees to catch his breath. Narcissus sprang from his chair, for this was the quickest runner in the palace and despatched only in an emergency.

“Jupiter! What is it, Phillipus?”

“Chief! Come quickly. Appius Silanus has just tried to assassinate the emperor.”

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No sooner had chief secretary heard the words than he started running toward the door and out into the maze of corridors that separated him from the offices of the emperor. Narcissus even bobbed when he ran, and really did look like he was galloping on a horse. I brought up the rear and would have overtaken him if it had not been for the clumsy woollen toga that wound around me. I also had

trouble getting a grip on the floor with my slippery new Spanish sandals, so I kept pitching forward into Narcissus.

I ran blindly, so when Narcissus stopped short at the entrance to Claudius' study I slammed into him. We fell and slid past the doorway on our stomachs. I smelled something burning and saw smoke coming from the room. We got to our feet as quickly as clandestine lovers caught in the act, and hurried inside. A praetorian was stomping out a small fire that had started when a stand holding four lamps had been knocked over, spilling oil on the animal fur carpet. The room smelled like someone had set a wet goat on fire.

Claudius was in one corner of the room. His lame right arm was bleeding and several slaves fussed over it with cotton batting and salve. He stared wide-eyed at Appius Silanus, who stood on the other side of the room. Three praetorians restrained him, one on each arm and a third behind him with a sword at his throat. He struggled helplessly against the grip of the immense Germans. I recognized the one holding the sword at Silanus' throat. It was red-lunch-box beard who had been guarding the door earlier. On the floor near his feet was a small, bloody dagger. It was small enough to conceal, but just large enough to kill at first stroke if the aim had been true.

The guard finished putting out the fire and looked up, proud and satisfied with his work. But sensing the paralyzing tension in the room he immediately dropped the corners of his mouth in a grimace. He joined us in watching the deadly tableau until Claudius broke the silence.

"Appius Silanus ... Why?" He wheezed. A tear squeezed past his eye and careened down his cheek. It splashed on the marble. "I brought you into my house. Married you to my wife's mother. I trusted you to come and go as you pleased."

"Yes, you did all that." said Appius Silanus. His head had been pulled back so far that he had difficulty speaking. With each vibration of his vocal chords, the sword shaved his Adam's apple. "Then you offered me as a stud to your wife."

"What!" Claudius pushed the slaves aside and made a threatening step toward Silanus. "What do you mean, Appius Silanus?"

"Don't play the innocent fool with me! You instructed Messalina to take me as her lover. You're all alike, you emperors." He spat into the air and the sword broke his skin for the effort. "It didn't take you too long to pick up where your disgusting nephew, Caligula, left off. "

Messalina appeared at the door. She was dressed like a proper Roman matron now, not like the half-naked carnal nymph in the atrium that had haunted my loins that morning. She went straight to her husband, modest cream-colored veils trailing in the smoky air behind her. What followed was an Atellan love farce so artificial in its kissy-face sensibility that we all turned our eyes away. After all, everyone in the room had probably slept with her. We suffered the fellowship of a collective embarrassment. She took up the ministrations of Claudius' torn flesh with a calculated care, while we waited for Claudius to wrest his attention from his "loving" wife.

"Silanus," Claudius said, calmer now, his eyes on the countenance of his beloved. "Repeat to Messalina what you just told me."

"Look at you. It's pathetic! Pretending for all Rome you're the loving couple while your wife hikes up her skirts for anything in a tunic."

"How can you say that, Silanus?" Messalina placed her palm over her husband's heart as if to soothe its labors. "It grieves me that you hate me so. I'm sorry for what I did to you, Silanus. If I had it to do over, I would have let you down a little easier. I never thought it would go this far." She buried her head in Claudius' chest and did a very good imitation of a sob.

Claudius stroked Messalina's hair then cupped her face in his hands. "What are you saying, my love?"

For lack of a kerchief, Messalina dried her eyes on the sleeve of her gown. I thought of Agrippa

and wondered if I'd ever get to eat my soup. I liked the theater, as long as it suspended disbelief. I was glad I hadn't had to pay to get in.

"Silanus followed me everywhere I went," she recounted through her tears. "He tried to enter my bedroom on several occasions. Once, when he accosted me in the atrium, I told him that his behavior was unacceptable, that I dearly loved my husband. I told him if he continued, I'd have to tell you."

"Is this true, Silanus?" Claudius said, his voice low and even.

"Caesar.. ."

"Is it true?" Much louder.

"No, Caesar!" The blood from the small wound in his neck seeped into his tunic. "It is she who pursued me. She told me you had brought me back from Spain to service her and her mother. She said you got your kicks that way. If I had known that before coming here I would have never agreed."

"Messalina shook her head. "Poor Silanus. How could you think I'd ever love another man the way I love my husband."

That, at least, was true. She had quite a few ways of loving, if I'd remembered correctly.

"Husband, Silanus gave me this." She took a scroll from her gowns and handed it to Claudius. He took the roll with the Pisces seal and opened it, then collapsed in a chair near his desk. "It's so embarrassing!" Her wrist flew to her forehead. "Please don't show it to anyone else!"

She probably didn't have to. We'd all look at it and say, "Oh, yeah. That's exactly as I remember her."

"Silanus went to the pornographer, Lucius Aelius, and demanded that he draw this — this filth! He didn't know the pornographer was a spy for the palace. Isn't that right, Narcissus?" Messalina looked at him with threatening eyes. He knew he'd better stick to answering the question as it was asked.

"He didn't know, Lady Messalina."

"I suppose he thought he could seduce me with his proportions," she said. I'm sure I saw her lick her lips. A subtle piece of stage business in a plot full of holes. Even Claudius knew Lucius Aelius only worked with live models. It was his trademark, as much as the Pisces seal. Surely, Claudius would realize this and the jig would be up for scheming Messalina.

Instead he said, "It must have been horrible for you, my dear. Why didn't you come to me sooner?"

Her hands went under her chin with the fingers splayed. She fluttered her eyelids. "I was so humiliated, I didn't know what to do. I'm just an innocent young woman, blind to the libidinous ways of men."

I had had enough. This woman was making a fool out of everyone and they all just stood there swallowing everything she said. Even Silanus, surrounded and at blade-point, was absolutely dumbstruck by her performance. I was particularly shocked at the way my uncle Claudius was fawning all over her like a schoolboy. I opened my mouth to say something, but Messalina saw me out of the corner of her eye while playing the other side of the room. She wheeled around and pointed straight at me.

"Thank the merciful gods for the wisdom of the Observer." Okay, she had my attention. "If it weren't for him we would never have known who killed Lucius Aelius. For he's the one who discovered that the pornographer had been strangled by Appius Silanus. And that the dastardly deed had been done because Lucius Aelius tried to blackmail him!"

Appius Silanus tried to break free, but the guards, as enraptured by this theatrical tidbit as they were, still held fast.

“Don’t you see, Caesar? She’s lying! She was in on it the whole time. She insisted on the drawing as a memento of the affair. I didn’t want to but she seduced me. The proof is that Lucius Aelius only worked from live mod —“

“Enough! I will hear no more of this. Silanus I condemn you to death for attempted assassination of the emperor of Rome. Let his body be dragged through the streets of Rome. Whatever is left over, feed it to the lion cubs at the circus Flaminius. Now get him out of here!”

The guards hurried Appius Silanus out. I could see that the guard with the red beard had his hand over Silanus’ mouth. It was probably for the best. The truth, even if it had come out that day, would have gone unheeded by my love-struck uncle.

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The feast of Mars. I sat in my garden and watched as Agrippa polished a gold plaque. Luna, my nubile and frisky wine servant, poured aged Falernian into a cup. I waved off the water. Luna smiled and departed. I sighed. She left a scent of rose petals on the early March breeze.

“What does this mean, master?” Agrippa held up the plaque I had set him to polish. It was the one I was going to hang up outside to announce my services. The one the emperor himself had given me for solving the murder of Lucius Aelius Severus, pornographer and citizen of Rome.

“Remind me to teach you how to read Latin, Grip. Hold it up. See how it catches the morning light? That’s because it’s pure gold, Grip.” He was suitably impressed. “Did I tell you the emperor himself gave me this plaque?”

“Yes, master. Twenty-seven times, if memory serves me.” He wiped his nose on his loincloth. He didn’t have to take it off to accomplish this feat. He had been using it to polish the plaque. “What does it say?”

It says:

\*Julius Claudius Drusus Antonius, the Observer  
An Unorthodox Sage\*