

Sharper Than A Serpent's Tooth

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She stood at the end of the tree-lined drive and watched as the last of the banquet's guests spilled noisily out of the brightly lit villa and into the night. The men spoke with the exaggerated volume of drunks and even some of the women teetered uncertainly as they headed for their carriages. She tutted to herself and wrapped her woven shawl tightly around her shoulders against the cold. It was still early spring and any heat from the day had dissipated hours ago. Her companions Gallus and Acerronia chattered inanely around and across her but she wasn't listening to their prattle about the party. She was thinking about why she was still alive.

The antidotes Agrippina had taken a few hours before were making her feel a little queasy, but they'd either done their job remarkably well or there had been no poison at all in her food or drink. *Curious*, she thought. *This isn't an opportunity I would have missed. He must want me to live after all.* The feast marking the end of the five-day festival of Minerva had been a riotous affair, with dancers, singers and actors performing in honour of the goddess of the arts. No one would have noticed if her wine cup had been filled from a substituted jug, or a dish of mushrooms spooned only onto her plate and no one else's. Still, here she was, none the worse for it. What's more, her son had been almost warm towards her throughout the meal. *Perhaps his thinking had changed?* Agrippina spotted him slowly making his way through his guests, accepting their thanks gracefully whilst steering an unerring path up the drive towards her. Today was their first meeting in almost six months since they'd argued so bitterly that she thought he would hit her.

Lucius strode the final few yards between them and seized Agrippina firmly by both shoulders. His people knew him as Nero, but he would always be her boy Lucius. 'Mother, let me look at you again' he announced, cocking his head to one side. 'You're quite as beautiful today as the day I was born, by the gods!'

'Take your hands off me, you foolish child' she scolded, recoiling as far as was possible from the smell of wine on his breath. 'You may have been there at the time, but you barely opened your eyes for the first week, and even then it was only to cry'. He pulled a face of mock hurt, causing her to soften. 'Anyway, I'm past forty now. My beauty has faded'.

'I've decided to escort you to your ship' he said, unperturbed. 'We can't very well have the mother of the Emperor walking about alone in the dead of night. You never know who's around'. *Indeed*, Agrippina thought, remembering the trouble he had caused as a teenager, marauding around Rome at night disguised as a peasant and picking fights with whoever his gang of friends came across. *How many citizens had perished in backstreet gutters as his fascination with violence grew?* She had lost count.

'More foolishness. Can't you see Gallus and Acerronia are here, and my lictors'. She nodded at the two men assigned to her by the Senate for her official protection. They carried bound bundles of sticks instead of weapons, symbols of authority rather than authority itself.

'Those two dolts?' the boy emperor exclaimed. They couldn't fight off a milkmaid. Come on, let's walk. I'll take care of you. Anyway, there are things we need to discuss'. The pair headed in the direction of the sea, the lictors going before them with torches, Agrippina's companions trailing discreetly a few yards behind.

'Perhaps you should reconsider your decision to take away my German bodyguards then, son?' she suggested once they had passed through the villa's gate.

Lucius eyed his mother carefully, looking for an insinuation of wrongdoing. 'You know that wasn't up to me, mother' he said, hating how quickly he became a whining boy again when speaking to her. 'I begged Burrus to let you have your Praetorians but he insisted that they stay in Rome close to me'.

She knew full well that the Praetorian Prefect Burrus would never have gone against her on his own, he owed Agrippina too much for getting him the job in the first place. *I made that man!* she seethed.

'Of course' she replied with outward calm. 'And once you had ordered me to move my household out of the capital, I suppose there was nothing to be done'.

'That's right' he said unconvincingly. The two continued down the sloping track, the stars bright above them in a cloudless sky. The villa was the only building for a mile, perched high up on a hill overlooking the bay of Neapolis, as flat as a lake in the distance.

'It's the Senate' he mumbled, stung by Agrippina's accusation that he wanted her gone from Rome. 'All that business of you listening in to their meetings from behind a curtain, interrupting and -'

'I was only there to protect you!' she said indignantly. 'You were barely seventeen and that den of thieves were pulling on your strings as though you were a puppet'.

'And they hated you for it!' he retorted, voice also rising before he regained his control. 'You don't understand - I have to walk a very thin line with the senators, I can't afford to make enemies of them'.

She hissed in scorn at this talk of Rome's ruling men - rich, entitled politicians and landowners interested only in their own fortunes. What were they compared to the power of a young emperor, guided by the experience of a born survivor like her?

'If they had one neck, I'd wring it, believe me Mother. But I can't kill them all at once, there'd be a revolt' he concluded glumly.

Agrippina had heard enough defeatism. She stopped and turned to face her son, gripping his right wrist.

'Tell me what this is' she demanded, yanking back his sleeve to reveal a dull green bracelet quite out of keeping with the gold rings and necklace the emperor wore.

'Come on, Mother, let's not do this now' he said, trying to squirm out of her surprisingly strong grasp.

'No -' she insisted, holding ever more tightly. 'Tell me what this is'.

Lucius slumped his shoulders in adolescent resignation. 'It's the skin of the snake that scared away the assassins from my crib' he droned in a bored voice, repeating the story for what felt like the thousandth time.

'That's right. When the last Emperor's wife sent men to kill you as you slept, this snake protected you. Why do you think that was? Eh?'

Lucius didn't respond so Agrippina answered for him.

'Because being Emperor is your birthright. We don't need to be afraid of the Senate. Don't you realise that we can do anything that we want? We're descended from the divine Augustus! You and I can rule them all'.

He snatched his hand back, her nails leaving red trails in his pale skin.

Lucius thought in silence, rubbing the scratches on his wrist. 'Let's not argue about them, Mother' he finally said with forced cheerfulness. 'Tonight's too beautiful to be spoiled by anger and accusation'. He gestured at the glittering sky. 'See, even the stars are dancing for Minerva'.

Agrippina looked at her son with an expression of weary despair. *The poor sap even believes in the gods*. Her thin temper was in danger of snapping completely and her voice became caustic.

'And this is precisely why I need to involve myself in everything! If I left you to your own devices, you'd waste all your time on poetry and the theatre'. Her words cut him deep and Lucius had to swallow a strong desire to scream in his mother's face.

'We're almost at the dock' he said instead. Agrippina wouldn't let it drop, however.

'Oh, to have been born a man! I've had to do things you couldn't imagine. All to get you a throne you're too weak to occupy alone. I sat alongside that idiotic old fool Claudius for almost six years and shaped this empire to get it ready for you. The shame of it! Do you think I wanted to marry my own uncle?'

'Or to poison him?' Lucius said a little too loudly. His mother lowered her voice and whispered back.

'That's right, otherwise you'd now be floating in the Tiber with all the other bodies, and your step-brother would be Emperor in your place!'

Lucius' expression darkened at the mention of Britannicus. His mind automatically flashed back two years to the look of agony on the boy's face in the final moments of his life, writhing on his back as the poison burned its cruel way through his insides.

'I'm capable of doing what needs to be done too, Mother' he replied.

They had reached the quayside at the bottom of the hill where two large boats bobbed rhythmically on the gentle swell. Lucius turned to Agrippina for a final time.

'I have to rule on my own now' he asserted bluntly. 'I'm twenty-one, and I'm the head of this family. I need to hear that you accept that'. The statement hung between them like a lead weight while the boats creaked and thumped against the stone edge of the quay.

'You won't survive without me to guide you' she insisted. 'Bring me back to Rome as your friend, not your enemy'.

Lucius could see that it was pointless continuing and reached his decision. He drew Agrippina to him and hugged her tightly as unexpected tears leaked from his eyes. Hot, liquid pain flooded through his chest and he fought to slow down his breathing. A minute passed before he was calm again.

'I forgot to mention,' he said before releasing her. 'Word was sent earlier that your ship was damaged during the crossing and isn't seaworthy. You'll have to take mine instead'.

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Agrippina watched her son on the quay disappear into the night as the borrowed ship slid smoothly across the glass-like sea, sheltered by the promontory of the bay. There was so little wind that the crew had to labour at the oars below, the sail hanging above, limply useless. She sat on a couch next to Acerronia, beneath an ornately decorated roof of wood, held up by a post at each corner. The shelter, at the boat's stern, allowed the passengers to view the passing scenery safe from the threat of sea squalls. Judging by the rough looking crew and craven captain, Agrippina decided that this shelter was the only good thing about her son's ship.

Gallus stood in front of the pair of women and was giving his excited opinion on the evening. 'The whole of Rome was there to see the Emperor publicly favouring you with his attention - you'll be recalled any day now, just you see!'

'Definitely. Any day now' Acerronia simpered in agreement. Agrippina was tired of both of these hangers-on, favourites of her dead husband and very dull company indeed. *However, she thought, better them than whoever Lucius would choose to spy on me.*

'Did you get the chance for a word with Octavia? What does she think?' Gallus asked.

Agrippina looked up sharply. She hadn't thought about her son's wife - and her ally - all night.

'Was she there?' she wondered out loud.

Gallus and Acerronia looked at each other in surprise. They had been seated towards the back of the enormous banquet and could see little of what had passed between the ruling

family at the front. Agrippina said nothing more, staring out to sea and thinking about the fact that the Empress had been left in Rome and what, if anything, that might signify.

Visibility was strikingly clear, an almost full moon and the vast panoply of stars making it possible to see all the way across the bay to Neapolis. The black bulk of Mount Vesuvio loomed behind the towns on the distant shore. The ship made steady progress along the coast, travelling a mile within a few minutes. At this speed, its passengers would be back at Agrippina's villa within the hour. The captain came over to check on his important cargo and, dismissed without a word, went back to the helm to oversee the steering of the ship's course.

A moment later, a loud creak from the ceiling above caused the seated women to look up, just in time to see the decorative ceiling buckle, splinter and disintegrate into shards as something far heavier than wood collapsed through the shelter's roof. They both instinctively screamed and ducked as a dark mass caved-in on them, knocking Gallus off his feet and burying him almost entirely. The previously brightly-lit night turned black in an instant, the stars and moon snuffed out by whatever was covering them. A second or two passed before either woman dared to draw a breath. The shouts of sailors and the captain were dimly audible through whatever it was that covered them.

'Are you alright, my lady?' Acerronia said, her hand finding Agrippina's leg in the blackness. She put her other hand up and felt the cool, unyielding surface of a heavy slab of some kind of metal. The couch's sturdy wooden arms and back seemed to be bearing the weight of the slab and had undoubtedly saved both their lives. Agrippina finally answered.

'I think so. My shoulder took a heavy blow from something, but I can move it. You?'

'A miracle, I'm untouched.' Relief quickly gave way to terror though, as the shouts of the crew continued around them.

'What happened? Did we hit something?' Acerronia asked, her voice shaking now that the initial surprise had faded.

'I don't know. Did you -' But Agrippina was cut off by the sudden shock of the ship lurching violently to one side. The noise of equipment skittering and clanging across the deck as the vessel rolled was briefly deafening. The couch, pinned in place, did not move an inch.

'We have to get out from under here!' she whispered urgently, tugging her companion with her, off the edge of the couch and onto the floor. From this position they could see what was left of Gallus, his foot protruding from beneath the black metal, twitching erratically. Painfully, Agrippina hauled herself backwards under the couch and clear of the remains of the shelter.

She stood up and locked her arms around the deserted helm just as the whole ship reeled back fiercely in the opposite direction. Acerronia, emerging from the collapsed shelter at that moment and with nothing to cling onto, slid helplessly across the deck towards the sea. She flailed for the handrail, missed, and with a terrified squeal was gone over the side. Agrippina stared in disbelief at the dark waters that had swallowed her companion, before her attention was forced onto what was going on further down the deck. The bow was already submerged, her lictors had vanished - *so much for their official protection* - and the captain was nowhere to be seen. Members of the crew had begun jumping overboard to escape the dying vessel, which wallowed ever lower as she watched. Craning her neck, she saw that two small ship's rowboats had somehow been floated off, and that the men in the water were making for them. She took stock of her options, quickly seeing that the shore was perhaps a quarter of a mile away to the west. The boats were her best chance. Without a further

thought, she let go of the helm, clambered over the handrail and allowed herself to drop into the sea.

The cold took her breath away instantly and she had to fight the screaming urge to breathe in. Kicking for the surface, she broke through and gasped a lungful of air. Her hair, now hopelessly disarrayed, was obscuring her eyes and she wiped it away angrily. Behind her, the ship groaned and gurgled as it disappeared in a froth of water. The two small boats were invisible to her, hidden by the undulating waves, but Agrippina shrugged off her heavy shawl and headed in their general direction with the smooth stroke of a practiced swimmer. Despite the wretched situation she was in, her mind flooded with images of the daily swims she had made twenty years ago, while exiled to a tiny island and with little else to occupy her. She smiled at the memory of how powerless she had been back then, gritted her teeth and kicked harder.

A minute's skilled swimming brought Agrippina to within earshot of the boats - she could hear men shouting to each other and the thump of the oars. Rising up on a swell, she caught sight of them, fifty yards away. She could also see another head bobbing in the water, much closer to being rescued, but clearly at the end of their strength. The swimmer was waving to the men and screaming something. As Agrippina drew ever closer, words started to filter through and she recognised the voice with an unexpected surge of joy. *Accerronia! Alive! I didn't know she could even swim!*

'Help me!' the noblewoman was screeching between gulps of seawater. 'Help!'

The helmsman in the nearest boat looked around at the half-drowned woman and turned the tiller to manoeuvre his vessel.

'Help me!' Accerronia continued to scream whenever she had enough breath to get out a couple of words. 'I'm Agrippina! - Save your Emperor's mother! - I order you - to help me!'

This seemed to have the intended effect, the sailors in the boat redoubling their efforts to reach her. Agrippina was more amused than angered by the borrowing of her name. *You couldn't blame the poor woman for clutching at anything to survive*, she thought. *And I doubt they'll throw her back once I arrive!*

Agrippina paused her stroke and trod water, watching and willing her companion to survive for a few more seconds as the boat accelerated to her rescue, four strong men straining at the oars. But the boat did not slow as it approached Acerronia, it seemed instead to speed up. Agrippina's heart leapt in fear and disbelief as the small boat struck the thrashing woman head on, before the oars were wedged hard into the water, skidding it to a sudden halt. The rowers stood up, long wooden oars in hand and used them to hold some writhing creature underwater. With dreadful certainty, Agrippina knew that it was Acerronia that they were drowning, not that they realised who she actually was.

She thought she heard a final, desperate scream - but it could just as easily have been a gull or the wind - before allowing herself to drift gently onto her back and away from the boats. She carefully kicked towards the shoreline, hoping that she was still far enough from the ship's crew to remain undetected.

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Gripping the wet sand with both hands, she was overwhelmed by feelings of vindication and defiance. It was not long past midnight and somehow Agrippina was still alive and had escaped the sea's clutching, chilling drag. She lay on the deserted foreshore for a few minutes simply breathing, allowing her heart to return to its normal placid beat and thinking through everything she had seen. *Did we hit something? But the sea was so calm, no hint of*

trouble... The ship sank so quickly! And what was with the collapsing ceiling? Surely that was solid lead that trapped me and killed Gallus? Despite many unknowns, Agrippina knew that she could now definitively answer one question: there could no longer be any doubt about Lucius's intentions towards her.

Her legs felt dangerously weak as she staggered towards the line of evergreen trees that fringed the beach. The road was just beyond, she knew, having travelled this thin stretch of the peninsula a dozen times since she had been forced out of Rome. *Wise to keep out of sight*, her survivor's brain advised, so she moved into the road's ditch and kept in a low hunch as she followed it in the direction of her villa. After a cautious hour's shuffling through the pre-dawn, Agrippina reached the edge of her estate. She stopped and waited, watching the house. Ten minutes later, having convinced herself that no one had beaten her here, she crept into the courtyard and banged on the wooden front doors.

The angry face of the porter appeared at the sliding security hatch after a few seconds and, recognising his mistress in the damp and bedraggled figure still hammering with both fists on the door, immediately slid back the bolts and let her in. A weight lifted from Agrippina's shoulders the instant she crossed the threshold. No longer afraid, she turned to the gaping porter and issued three one-word orders.

'Wine - Towel - Agermus'. The man nodded wordlessly and scampered off to worry about which he should fetch first. Agrippina dragged the watchman's chair away from the wall and positioned it directly in front of the entrance hall's open fireplace. The flames were almost out, but the heat coming off the glowing embers was enough to warm her puckled skin through her ruined clothes. Less than a minute later, as she was still enjoying the sensation of returning warmth, her freedman Agermus hurtled into the room from a side corridor, hastily buttoning his tunic as he took in the scene before him.

'Domina!' he exclaimed in shock. 'What has happened?'

Agrippina looked up from the fire and smiled at the ex-slave. 'Many things, Agermus. Many things' she said and proceeded to relate the story of the last few hours. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and tried to keep up.

The wine and the towel (in that order) had helped Agrippina recover most of her normal composure by the time she had brought Agermus up to speed. Her advisor had stood, occasionally pacing, as the tale had twisted and turned, considering each piece of information as closely as a jeweller scrutinises a gem.

'I agree with your interpretation, Domina' he concluded after the brief silence which had followed his mistress's retelling. 'But I never imagined the Emperor would become so depraved - you'll forgive me Domina - ' Agrippina waved away the insult to her son ' - that he'd actually try and murder you'.

'Nothing Lucius does surprises me anymore' she said with a mixture of sadness and anger.

'The question is, what do I do now?' Agermus joined her next to the dying fire, wracking his mind for anything he could suggest that would make any difference

'I think we can make some deductions that might help, if we think about things from his position'.

'Indeed, Agermus?'

He nodded enthusiastically. 'You said he had every opportunity to poison you at the feast of Minerva -'

'Yes. But I felt nothing amiss. Even the wrong dose, or something I had prepared against, would still have made me sick' Agrippina said. Agermus chewed on this new information.

'If he wanted to make a statement, it was the perfect public place and manner in which to do it...'

'Meaning?' she demanded.

'Meaning that there must be a good reason why he didn't. I can only infer that he's scared' the freedman replied.

'Scared? Lucius? The only thing that scares him is the thought of work' Agrippina scoffed.

Agermus disagreed. 'He's scared enough of you to try and kill you in a manner that he could pass off as an accident. An accident following a feast at which the world could see how well the two of you were getting on. He wants you out of the way, but without any blame attaching to him'.

Agrippina thought through her advisor's line of logic. It made sense, she couldn't deny it. He was right in almost every respect.

'Except it's not me he's scared of, Agermus'.

'No, Domina, not directly. But he understands your popularity with the people. After all, you led Rome in the last years of your husband's life. And perhaps he has also been told how differently they feel about him?' The people of Rome were truly something to be frightened of, Agrippina thought. And it was a short hop from an angry mob to a conspiracy of murderous senators. Plenty of Rome's rulers had perished from a fatal lack of popularity with the rich and poor alike. In fact, she realised, her death might help him regain the people's sympathy.

'I bet the ungrateful bastard would even manage to cry at my state funeral' she muttered with appalled certainty, as her son's plans began to assume clarity for her.

Agermus politely ignored the statement. 'There really is only one thing you can do in the circumstances, Domina -'. He paused for effect a little too long and drew an impatient glare from Agrippina. '- And that is to use his fear against him.'

'How so?'

'Go along with the story and act dumb. I suggest that I ride to his villa immediately and bring the Emperor the happy news that his beloved mother has somehow survived a terrible shipwreck and requests that he visit her sickbed'.

Agrippina's eyes widened in understanding and she broke out a seldom-seen grin.

'Perfect. Too, too perfect Agermus' she said, taking his face in her hands as her mood swung violently from fatalism to hope. The ex-slave tried not to pull back in shock.

'That's exactly what we'll do! He couldn't explain away a second accident, no one would buy it! And clearly he doesn't want anyone to see my blood on his hands. That's it, Agermus! I'm safe'. Elation turned to relief and the energy drained from Agrippina's body. She slumped back in the chair and suddenly felt very tired.

'I'll leave immediately Domina' Agermus said, feeling more than usually pleased with himself.

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Dawn crept over the Emperor's villa with its normal casualness, as if the night had hidden nothing of importance. Inside, Agermus's body sprawled on the mosaic floor, it's heart still working hard to pump his blood into a spreading pool of ink-dark red, finding its way along the lines of the mosaic to form a pattern of its own.

Nero squatted above Agermus and gazed in wonder at the spectacle, a dripping dagger clutched in his left hand. 'Come and look at this Seneca!' he said with enthusiasm. 'See how the liquid moves in straight lines. It's quite something.' The old man, for many years the boy Emperor's tutor then advisor, moved closer and stooped to pretend to look.

'Quite so, Emperor. Most interesting'. The philosopher paused for a second before deciding to continue. 'Did you absolutely need to kill him, Emperor?'

'Need?' Nero asked, shocked by the question. He stood and held up the dagger to the room.

'You all saw him, he had a knife. He brought a weapon here to kill me. What else should I do with assassins?'

'Assassins, Emperor? Was he not your mother's messenger?'

'Sent by my mother, I agree, but an armed assassin and nothing less. The message was just a ruse' Nero stated.

Seneca looked at Burrus appealingly. The towering Praetorian Prefect took his turn.

'I think what Seneca is saying, Emperor, is that he was not a threat once he had handed the weapon over as you'd ordered. We could have learned more from him before he - justly - had to die'.

The young Emperor huffed and shrugged. 'Maybe. Maybe. But we know enough. Somehow, the witch isn't dead. That's the only point that matters. And anyway, it's you bunch of imbeciles that have bungled this, not me' Nero said, remembering that he didn't need to listen to anything he didn't agree with. He looked around at his assembled advisors and started to work himself up into one of his rages. They recognised the darting look in his eyes. 'Stand to attention in the presence of your Emperor!' he suddenly barked at Burrus, who complied with a practised ease. 'You too, Admiral!' Nero shouted at Anicetus, the commander of the navy in this part of Italy. Both men stood stiffly upright and silently willed the Emperor to single out the other as the target of his anger.

'I blame you, Burrus!' Nero shouted at the emotionless soldier stood at attention in front of him. His voice slid into a mocking parody and his face adopted a sarcastic sneer '*What could go wrong Emperor? It will be like child's play, Emperor*' he said. Burrus remained implacable, staring straight ahead until the storm blew itself out. Nero moved his hand as if to slap his Prefect around the face but checked it just in time with a triumphant 'Hah!' as the man flinched involuntarily. Having demonstrated his superiority, the Emperor stalked away and moved on to other targets.

'She always was a slippery one. I should have made doubly certain'.

'Doubly, Emperor?' Seneca chanced, his voice doubtful.

'Yes, Seneca, doubly' he retorted testily. 'I should have had a warship full of archers standing by to mop up any survivors. Made sure.' He jabbed the still-bloodied dagger at an imagined enemy in front of him, twisting it with a grimace.

'Such an action would have been unlikely to stay a secret for long, Emperor' the old man intoned calmly. 'Remember, the prime reason we settled on Anicetus's plan was because very few people needed to know about it. At night, at sea, all the appearance of a tragic accident. It was a solution to your problem without any consequences. A handful of sailors knew and no one else. And by now they are all dead anyway, isn't that right, Prefect?'

Burrus nodded his large head. 'That's right. A platoon of my best cavalry met the ship's boats when they landed. There were no survivors of the accident, it turns out'.

At this news Anicetus interjected. 'What's that? My men are dead?'

'A necessary step, I'm afraid, Admiral' Seneca said with his customary passivity.

'They were my men!' Anicetus began. 'You had no right -'

'My men' Nero corrected him icily, silencing the Admiral's objections in an instant. He tapped the man on the shoulder with the sticky dagger. 'But that reminds me of an important point. This was your plan after all. What should I do now, do you suggest?'

Anicetus wetted his lips nervously with his tongue and resisted the urge to look down at the blade.

'Well, I concede that my plan hasn't been entirely successful -'

'At *all* successful'.

'At all successful,' Anicetus corrected himself. 'But perhaps I can still get you the outcome you want, Emperor'. He glanced at his shoulder and quickly regretted it. Agermus's blood had soaked into the white linen of his cloak. *That will have to be burned*, he thought.

'Continue' Nero ordered, moving round behind the Admiral, all the while keeping the dagger in place. Seneca cut in before Anicetus could carry on.

'Another accident is of no use now, Emperor. It was a good plan, but plans do not always become reality. It is no one's fault'. Nero tilted his head from side to side, weighing up his advisor's argument. Seneca took that as a signal to continue.

'Agrippina is a clever woman -'

'Obviously' Nero added, gesturing at himself.

'- who no doubt has worked out precisely what you tried to do, Emperor. This story from her man here -' Seneca pointed at the cooling body on the floor '- about wanting to see you was just that, a story meant to reassure us. No, she knows that you meant to murder her and that really only leaves us one option'.

Nero removed the dagger from his Admiral's shoulder and weighed it in his hand. Acerinus let out a long, silent breath. 'You're right of course, Seneca. She has to die' the Emperor said without emotion. He paced around the body of his mother's freedman, carefully stepping over the congealing red pool. 'I wanted to avoid anything as obvious as spilling blood, but as you say, we're out of options now. Acerinus -' he said, causing the Admiral's heart rate to leap once more. 'Acerinus, you shall redeem yourself by carrying it out personally. No mistakes this time, understood?'

The naval commander snapped his arm straight in a smart salute, momentarily relieved to have an excuse to leave.

'At once, Emperor' he replied and made rapidly for the door.

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The porter showed the Admiral and his trio of armed marines into the villa's sitting room. It led out to an open portico with an expansive view of the bay of Neapolis. The sea was studded with the sails of fishing boats and early-morning travellers making their way between the towns of the bay.

'You are not the Emperor' Agrippina said archly from her couch, looking up at her visitor with the full condescension of a lifetime spent among the rulers of the world. 'Where is my son? Does he follow close behind?'

Acerinus shifted his weight nervously from one leg to the other. Despite what he was here to do, he was still cowed by the woman's hauteur. He cursed the day he had asked for the honour of being posted to this sector, full of the summer playgrounds of the rich.

'Er, no. The Emperor is indisposed I'm afraid, my lady'.

Agrippina's incredulous tone showed how unimpressed she was with this answer.

'Indisposed? Did my man not deliver the message that I am alive - by some miracle of the gods! - following a terrible accident at sea?'

'He did arrive, yes -' the Admiral tailed off as he could think of nothing more that he could add. Agrippina was growing angrier with each unsatisfactory response.

'And yet my son chooses to luxuriate at home and sends his boy to check on me. You are not needed!'

Acerinus remained standing in front of the Emperor's mother, silent and unsure of when to take the final step.

'And in whose slave-kitchen were you dragged up, bringing your soldiers into my private rooms?' she added, waving dismissively at the marines. 'Get rid of them'. Further seconds passed and still Acerinus could find nothing to say.

'Well? Out with it man! Speak your message. You look like a dead fish, stood there open-mouthed'. Her words dripped with disdain but Acerinus felt no insult. If anything he was glad, as it made what was to come next easier. The Admiral clenched his jaw and reminded himself that he was the one in control. He drew his dagger and offered the handle to the woman on the couch.

'My lady' he said, lowering his eyes.

'What's this?' Agrippina said, feigning ignorance and passing over the implication. 'Put that away and get out'. She turned her head, staring out to sea, indicating that the matter was closed. No one was convinced by her playing dumb, least of all the porter and two attending slaves who chose this moment to flee, the crash of a dropped jug and the clatter of their panicked footsteps echoing down the corridor.

Agrippina turned back to face the assassins her son had sent, reluctantly accepting that the time for brazening things out was at an end.

'So, this is it, is it?' she asked. 'What did he tell you? That I'd plotted against him? That I wouldn't let him make his own decisions? You wait until Burrus hears about this!'

The Admiral was silent again.

'Well, you can see the quality of his decisions for yourself, I'm sure' she said bitterly. She shook her head at the unfairness of it all, the rank ingratitude.

'I can help you to do it, my lady, if you like' Acerinus offered softly.

'Help me? You'll need to do more than that' Agrippina said, rising to her feet. 'I'm not giving him the satisfaction of saying this was suicide'. Grabbing his arm she pushed the dagger against her stomach. He resisted enough to stop it from cutting into her skin.

'My lady -' he began to protest.

'Here!' she screamed over him, her anger as sudden and frightening as a sea-storm. 'Stab me here! That's where he crawled from!'

Acerinus fought to pull the dagger backwards, shocked by her strength and repulsed by her suggestion. She released his arm and grabbed her belly in both hands. 'If you're going to kill me, strike me through the womb! It's the cause of all my troubles'. Her eyes burned with the hatred, pride and aggression that had done so much to propel her son to the throne.

Acerinus let the dagger fall from his hand, harmlessly clinking against the floor. Agrippina's anger dissolved into acceptance and she slumped to her knees. Her hands still clasped her stomach and her mouth was set in a leer of contempt for the men before her. He turned to his marines and nodded. Two men moved into place behind Agrippina and held her by the arms. Acerinus reluctantly drew his short sword, placed its tip on her throat and forced himself to meet those eyes one last time.

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A great-granddaughter of the famous Augustus Caesar, Agrippina's life was filled with the tragedy and terror that came with the territory for an elite family in Rome in the first century. Her father, the popular general Germanicus, had been poisoned by a rival for power. Her mother and two of her brothers were killed when Agrippina was still growing up. Another brother, who became Emperor Caligula, was murdered by his own guards. Her sister Livia was one of Messalina's victims and Agrippina herself resorted to marrying her own uncle in order to find safety. Little wonder, perhaps, that she was described by the ancient authors as ruthless and domineering, the original 'tiger mother' who knew that the alternative was almost certain death for her and her son Nero. Shakespeare's line "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!" would therefore have rung true for Agrippina, who had devoted her life to securing her son's safety and power.

The story of her death is told by [Tacitus](#) and [Suetonius](#) but is now regarded as a bit too far-fetched and dramatic to be entirely true - it was probably embroidered to make Nero seem utterly despicable and heartless.

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