

The Praetorian Guard

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By : Matthew Bissonette

A story of the assassination of a Roman Emperor by his own guard.

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It was a warm autumn morning in the city of Rome in the year 222 B.C. as two men stood outside a small shop and talked as their fellow citizens walked past on the cobblestone street. This part of the city was where the more modest homes and businesses were located, white structures made from Roman fine concrete. The sun shined down from a cloudless sky when the two men and all those walking along the street stopped and witnessed a most strange and peculiar sight.

A young man, delicate of both figure and features; walked backwards along the street as he held a large boulder and for he was dressed in the most expensive of linen. All watched as the man continued backwards down the street with the boulder yet none dare speak and simply witnessed this strange event stupefied. Once the young man had walked away, one man turned to the other and spoke.

“If I'm not mistaken, but was that not Emperor Elagabalus?”

The other man looked towards the Emperor backing away in the distance and replied, “Rome has seen fit to make another lunatic Emperor.”

Then all resumed their daily affairs.

Nightfall on the outskirts of the city. There was a large home on the edge of the Tiber river made from fine polished marble and surrounded by gardens. The soft glow from torches bellowed from the windows of the home as a man knocked on the door.

He, Maximus, was dressed in the dark colored armor of the elite guard of the emperor, the Praetorian guard. He was tall and lean with short sandy hair and a deep scar over his left eye. He continued to knock then waited.

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The door opened a crack and Junius peered out and asked, "did you come alone Maximus?"

Maximus nodded and the door swung open. Junius, a large man with a thick beard and dark hair stood in the doorway who also wore the armor of the Praetorian guard. The two men sized each other up.

Maximus asked, "Junius, why have you asked to meet secretly with me?"

Junius replied, "I will tell you once you are inside."

He stepped aside and Maximus entered and Junius closed the door. Inside was a large room with tapestries on the wall and several expensive chairs about as well as a table with a jug and two cups upon it. Maximus stood in the center of the room as Junius went to the table and poured wine from the jug into a cup then handed the cup to Maximus who took it.

As Maximus drank, he said, "I assume from your conduct what you are about to tell me is a most sensitive matter Junius."

Junius spoke as he filled a cup for himself with wine. "We have been friends ever since we fought together against those barbaric savages on the frontiers of the Empire during our youth spent as members of the legions."

Maximus grunted. "I try my best not to think of those times. Those blood soaked memories do not fill me full of fond memories. I appreciate that your word on my behalf was responsible for my current post protecting that fool who we call emperor."

Junius drank deeply from his cup then said, "that fool is why I have asked you to come here tonight."

Maximus looked at him and asked, "why did you ask me here really?"

Junius, seeming troubled, replied, "the Praetorian guard usually protects the Emperor, but on a rare occasion we must protect the empire from the Emperor himself."

Maximus said before drinking deeply from his cup, "the guard is planning to remove Elagabalus from the imperial throne aren't they?"

Junius refilled his cup then drank. After he looked into his cup as he said, "Rome could tolerate an Emperor who dresses in the clothing of women. We could tolerate an emperor who had the male charioteer whom he beds with flog him publicly; but now the Emperor seeks to be castrated and the powers behind the throne have reached their limit."

Maximus stared at Junius as he spoke. "How many Emperors with odd defects of character has Rome known. Is he no worse than Caligula or Nero?"

"Elagabalus is going to meet the same fate as Caligula and Nero, we both know very well that the position of Emperor is dangerous for those who are not careful. The Emperor is going to meet his end, hopefully by your hand Maximus."

Maximus frowned and looked at him. "Why by my hand?"

"Because," Junius replied, "I know of no member of the guard more capable. During our time in the legions on the frontiers of Empire, you slew more men than any other and this task requires a man who is that

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exacting with a blade.â

Maximus grunted. â I did what was required of me, I hoped never to have to listen to the wailing of a dying man again. I hope to have such things relegated to the past.â

Junius told him, â the Emperor has become an embarrassment.â

Maximus replied, â that is nothing new in Rome. How many madmen have sat upon the Imperial throne? If I were to remove Elagabalus from power then will I have to do the same grim thing to the next madman as well Junius?â

Junius said, â hopefully our next Emperor will be more capable of handling the responsibilities of the throne.â

â How many members of the guard are behind this,â asked Maximus.

â All of them.â

â Then why must the Emperor die by my hands?â

Junius explained, â we have talked the matter over and decided that this task would be best handled by a man with a character such as yourself.â

â What do you imply?â

Junius grinned and said, â someone who does not mind blood on his hands, and we both know that your hands are drenched in it from our times in the legions.â

Maximus lowered his cup and looked solemnly at the dark wine within it. He then muttered, â I have lost count of how many men perished because of my blade, but many of their faces still haunt me when I sleep.â

Junius looked at Maximus for a moment then explained, â it is the nature of war, had you not slew those men, it would have been you who perished. And I doubt the face of Maximus would haunt their dreams.â

Maximus then put his cup on the table and turned his back to his friend. He said, â but this is not war, that effeminate cretin who we call Emperor could probably be bested in battle by my younger sister. You and the guard ask me to exact a very bitter end to a man who will be unarmed, a man who I have been sworn to serve.â

â Elagabalus would not be the first Emperor to be slain by those who have sworn to protect him.â

Maximus looked over his shoulder at the other man and asked, â the Praetorian guard watches over the Emperor, but who Junius watches over the Praetorian guard?â

Junius laughed and told him, â we are the Empire's last line of defense when a man assumes the mantle of leadership and proves himself to be unworthy of such a title.â

Maximus said, â then why do you not use your own blade Junius?â

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Junius thought for a moment then replied, "because our Emperor, why a simpleton and a fool, does not trust I nor other members of the guard. But you are new to our order and he may not suspect you."

Maximus frowned. "Junius, I remember our time in the legions and you seem to have the mind of a politician and not a warrior. I guess I should have known you never had the stomach for such a grim task. But you ask me to kill the Emperor of the Roman Empire."

"Is it that uncommon," Junius commented, "the myth of the founders of the city of Rome itself was of one brother slaying the other for power. Politics and death are very common companions in Rome."

Maximus then looked away. "We are friends Junius."

Junius nodded. "And have been for a long time."

Maximus lowered his head and lowly said, "don't ask me to do this, don't ask me to shed the blood of another man so he may wait for me in my thoughts when I close my eyes and look at me accusingly."

"Getting sentimental in your older age Maximus I see," Junius said.

"Older and more troubled by the things I've seen."

Junius refilled his cup from the jug and drank deeply from it. He then said, "the Emperor is the one the world looks to when they think of Rome. What do our enemies think when they see a man like Elagabalus sitting in the imperial throne. If they see weakness in such a man then they will see weakness in Rome itself."

Maximus sighed and said, "I really do not want to perform such a task."

Junius flatly replied, "remember what you told me in the legions, the reason that you fought with the same fearless zeal of some of the savages we fought was because you wanted to serve Rome."

Maximus glumly said, "I was younger and was still ignorant of issues like death."

"Maximus, Rome needs your service again and this time it needs you to protect it from its own Emperor."

Maximus then was silent for a few moments as Junius stared blankly at him, Maximus said nothing until he muttered, "OK, I will do it Junius. I guess there will soon be the memory of an Emperor waiting to torment me in my dreams."

Junius laughed deeply then said, "Maximus, I know you well enough to know that you were always meant to use the blade. It was what the Gods intended when they set about creating the man named Maximus."

Maximus asked, "so when do I remove our Emperor from the throne?"

Junius replied, "tomorrow. The rest of the guard will be somewhat incompetent of their duties for one day."

Maximus then went to the door and opened it when a sudden gust of wind blew through the door and tumbled the cloth drapes of the windows. Maximus looked back at the other man and said, "I will do as the guard

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and Rome ask, but Junius, I do not wish to see you for awhile once this is done.â Then he left and slammed the door behind him.

Junius drank from his cup and swirled its contents about as he looked at the liquid. â Seems conflicted for a man who was born a warrior, a man talented with the blade but not much else I'm afraid.â

The next day.

Deep within the massive imperial palace was a long darkened hallway, torches hung from the walls amongst granite pillars and to the far end was a door to a small chamber where the Emperor went to relieve himself. Maximus marched down the hallway with a blade in one hand which was trembling in his grip. He then went through the door. The hallway was silent for a moment when suddenly the dying screams of a man echoed out through the door. After several moments Maximus walked out from the door, bloodied sword in one hand and breathing heavily. He then dropped the sword and marched away. Then Junius appeared and ran towards Maximus then stopped.

Junius asked, â is it done?â

Maximus did not look at him as he walked past. â The throne is vacant for the next fool who wishes to risk his life so he may sit in it.â

Junius smiled and raised his voice as Maximus walked away. â Same old Maximus, a born killer.â

Maximus muttered under his breath, â may the gods damn you Junius as surely they will one day damn me.â

Junius watched him walk away.

And that day the Praetorian guard watched over the throne even though there was none who sat in it.

The End

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