

SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF ULPIAN

Scene One. Place: reception hall, the imperial palace, Rome. Time: fall 221.

ULPIAN (U). Your majesty, I am mightily honored to be called to an audience.

ELAGABALUS (E). I am glad that you have answered my summons. I have been wanting to have a discussion with you.

U: I am at your service, as always.

E: Well, various ones of my courtiers tell me that you know the most of anyone about who will live and who will die. And how long they might live.

U: Well, my work has dealt only with averages. We none of us know whether we shall live another hour, another day, another week, another month, another year, another decade.

E: I suspect you may know more than you are willing to admit. Surely, there are factors which are predictive of long survival, and other factors predictive of shorter survival.

U: Well, every life has its own particular risks. For example, the gladiator may be slain in combat.

E: So what do you think of the survival chances of emperors?

U: I fear my answer might offend your majesty. A few have lived long lives, and have died in their beds. But more recently, more of them have met violent ends.

E: And what if I have proclaimed my own divinity as Elagabal?

U: Other emperors have proclaimed their divinity, and yet have followed their subjects to their graves.

E: So you predict the grave for me?

U: One can never know anything with certainty. Perhaps you will be the first human being to be immortal.

E: Assuming that I am not that rarest of rare exception to our common mortality, how much more life do you predict for me?

U: I have been so bold to say that a majority of our emperors in recent years have met violent ends.

E: How might I endeavor to be among the minority who have died in their beds after long lives?

U: I should say to govern wisely, to stay in good favor with your troops, and to lead them to victory when revolt raises its ugly head.

E: So you would sacrifice me on the field of battle? What if I were to die violently there?

U: Your good repute would undoubtedly be eternal. In that way you might win immortality.

E: So you wish me dead on a foreign battle field, rather than ruling wisely, or perhaps unwisely, here?

U: You asked me how you might reign long. I think you will more likely end a casualty if you remain in Rome and allow others to do your fighting. In Rome, you are basically at the mercy of the Praetorian Guard. If their loyalty changes, you could be dead in a minute and your successor enthroned the following day.

E: You would question the loyalty of my troops? I have only to utter the word, and your execution would follow.

U: I have no doubt of that, your majesty.

E: Then you think the Guard will desert me for young Severus? I have made him Caesar and anointed him as my successor. Surely, he can wait until my time is past.

U: You probably cannot kill him as easily as you can kill me.

E: What makes you say that? He is here in Rome. His life is forfeit at my command.

U: But will the Guard obey you if you issue such a command? Perhaps they would rather have young Severus as their emperor.

E: Why should that be? I give to the Guard as liberally as I can from my treasury.

U: Yet, they must pay heed—as even must the emperor—to the complaints of the people. If the law is disregarded, and citizens are slain without trial, the people are aware. If their beloved gods are thrust aside for the worship of a new god, the people are likewise aware.

E: So you are saying that the people will not have Elagabal as their god and me as his priest?

U: Other emperors have proclaimed their own cults. But they have not tried to displace all the traditional cults of days of yore.

E: I have not torn down any of the temples of the other gods.

U: Yet, you took one of the Vestal Virgins in marriage.

E: Should she not have been honored to receive my imperial favors?

U: I cannot speak for the vestal, your majesty. I can only say that certain of your subjects were offended by your action.

E: Well, then, I might have their lives for treasonous speech. As I might have yours, for speaking so. I begin to understand my predecessor Nero, who wished that Rome might have but one throat, so that he might cut it.

U: Yet, Nero had to fall on his sword when the people and the armies rose against him. He could not even succeed in thrusting upon the Christians their just anger.

E: Nero was the last man of my caliber to occupy this throne. He was a true artist and poet. Marcus Aurelius was a mere pretender by comparison.

U: Yet, Aurelius was one of the minority who died in his bed. He enjoys a good repute to this day.

E: I would rather take the counsel of Caligula, who said of his people that they might hate him, so long as they feared him.

U: Yet, like Nero, he died by violence.

E: So, if I wish to live a long life, I must pull down the temple of Elagabal, cease to take life without trial, and go into the field to lead my armies?

U: I do not know that you need to pull down your own temple. Perhaps it would be best to assign another as high priest. If you do not wish to take the field, you might at least govern more liberally and respect the legal rights of all your citizens.

E: Do we not both come from the East? What have we in common with the rabble of Rome?

U: We have in common that we, like they, are Roman citizens, with all the duties and the privileges which that status entails.

E: What if I will live and govern just as I have done so far? What then do you—who are reputed to know so much about the lives of men—predict for me?

U: Unless you succeed in killing him first, I predict the Guard will kill you and proclaims young Severus as your successor.

E: And how soon might that be? He is still a youth—several years younger than I.

U: It is the support of arms which make the emperor. I admit that a mere infant would probably require a regent, but Severus is old enough to govern. After all, you have made him Caesar and your appointed successor.

E: Of which offices I can and I will deprive him, if any hint of disloyalty reaches my ears.

U: I do not think you can kill Severus at this point. He is with troops who are loyal to him and to his mother. It is a likelier result that the Guard will kill you and proclaim Severus.

E: If you are so privy to treasonous counsels, how soon do you think they will do these things?

U: I partake in no treason. I hear only what is common knowledge.

E: So all but I know that I am not long for this life?

U: You could take steps to avoid the eventuality.

E: What would you recommend?

U: You could abdicate and pass the scepter to Severus.

E: I should be dead within the week.

U: You could secure a pleasant, but unobtrusive, villa somewhere in your realms—far away from Rome—and simply take flight there with the knowledge of as few persons as possible.

E: And such a life would content me after I have tasted the privileges of being emperor? My temple would probably be destroyed within weeks if not days. My successor would seek me far and wide and

offer large rewards for my betrayal. I who could command a vestal to join me in the hymeneal bed—whom could I command to share my bed in this obscure countryside villa? I who could dine on the greatest rarities that can grace a table—what would I have to content me in my dining salon?

U: You would at least have your breath within you. I don't doubt that with the resources you could take with you, you might have beautiful youths—of either or of both sexes—to keep you company in your bed—and fine food to eat.

E: I who might have lobsters stewed in flamingo tongues—what would I have to eat that would please my palate in such a villa?

U: Food enough to content your hunger. With the hope of seeing a new day without constant fear that the next day may bring the sword to kill you.

E: Well, I refuse such a fugitive life. I am emperor, and I will remain emperor. Anyone who would dethrone me must live in fear of his life.

U: It is the fact that the people must live in fear of arbitrary actions that poses the greatest danger to you. If you were well-loved for your good governance, both your troops and young Severus would yield obedience to you. They would fear the anger of the people if they were to act against you.

E: Do you think that the Guard fears the rabble that is the people of Rome?

U: Yes, I do. It is the people who are the final governor. The people make the law, and even the emperor must follow it if he wishes to prosper.

E: If I do not make myself obedient to this rabble and their so-called law, how long do you give me, mister *legis peritus*?

U: If you attempt active harm to young Severus, I give you only a matter of days. The Guard will slay you.

E: What if I send young Severus and his dear mama packing, depriving him of his office as Caesar and successor?

U: Perhaps you might have a few months more. Severus will still have the troops loyal to him, even if he is banished from Rome. If you continue as you have been doing, the Guard will still rise to kill you.

E: Caesar fell to traitors on the Ides of March. Do you think I shall still be reigning when it shall next be the Ides of March? Let us presume I do no active harm to young Severus.

U: I would give it about even odds.

E: So it is as likely that I will be dead by the next Ides of March as it is that I will still be reigning—even if I refrain from killing young Severus?

U: By my estimation, yes.

E: Well, then, I will make a prediction of my own. You have prospered under my reign, although I have no great regard for your beloved law. You will not survive my reign—at least not by more than a few days. You will perish as a supporter of Elagabalus. Someone else will take your office.

U: I think your prediction has a fair likelihood of being correct.

E: Never forget that I could make it a certainty by my order, whenever I wish. You enjoy no such popular repute as you claim for young Severus. I could have you executed by the sword this very day, if I wished.

U: I am aware of that, your majesty.

E: So conduct yourself accordingly. And mind what you say to me—and to others. The very walls have ears.

U: I spoke only because you sought my frank opinions.

E: Well, now I have heard them, and they are not to my liking.

U: I regret having offended your majesty.

E: Well, be gone now. And do not offend me with further speech.

U: Yes, your majesty.

Ulpian withdraws.

Scene Two. Place: reception hall, imperial palace. Time: March 11, 222. Elagabalus sits on his throne with a contingent of troops on one side of the hall. Ulpian enters.

U: I return from my mission to young Severus.

E: And the result?

U: He says that he is disposed to spare you and your mother if you will resign your office and be content to take up exile in the place to be designated by him.

E: And you think I and my mother can trust him to keep his promise?

U: I can venture no opinion. But it seems to me that your alternatives are few. Your temple is already in flames and the statue of Elagabal overthrown. The people in the streets proclaim young Severus. The Guard does nothing to impede them. I do not think the Guard would accept an order to engage Severus and his troops. It is possible that the remaining troops will be withdrawn from here, allowing the people to exact their own justice.

E: I do not believe you. Praetor, please step forward.

Praetor: Yes, your majesty.

E: Is my temple aflame, and the statue of Elagabal overthrown?

Praetor: I have not heard, your majesty. My troops and I are stationed here for your protection.

E: Is young Severus proclaimed in the streets?

Praetor: Again, I have not heard, your majesty. My troops and I recognize no emperor other than yourself.

E: If you are ordered to march hence to engage the troops of Severus, will you do so?

Praetor: I am a soldier. I follow the orders of my superiors.

E (speaking to Ulpian): So you see how you have lied to me. The Praetor has heard nothing of the things of which you speak. Those few traitors who proclaim the accession of young Severus will be dealt with. Have you anything to say for yourself?

U: I sought only to report the results of my mission to Severus—the mission which you entrusted to me.

E: Well, you have reported falsely and traitorously, and now you shall pay the penalty. (Speaking to the Praetor): Execute this traitor with your sword.

The Praetor draws his sword, but executes not Ulpian, but Elagabalus, who falls from his throne.

Praetor (speaking to Ulpian): I'm going to detach a number of troops to accompany you to your home. Stay there until you hear that Severus is proclaimed and installed in the imperial palace. Say nothing of what you have seen here today. If you conduct yourself well, you may even survive to serve under the new emperor.

Ulpian nods his assent to the Praetor and leaves with a small body of soldiers.

Finis

Author's Note: Some authorities maintain that the jurist Ulpian (whose table of life expectations has been noted in actuarial literature) died during the reign of Elagabalus. I leave to the reader the task of imagining how my second scene might be revised to accommodate this assertion.