

Elagabalus, Unpublished manuscript. © Jean-Paul Martinon, 2010.

The scene takes place in the temple of the Castra Praetoria in Rome, during the night of 10 March 222. The temple inner chamber is a stark room with a stone altar at one end. There is a statue above the altar, but it is covered with a veil. On the altar, there are remnants of food, a pitcher with wine and pewter goblets.

Elagabalus was a Roman Emperor of the Severan Dynasty. He was born in 204 in Syria, the second son of local Roman dignitaries, Julia Soaemias and Sextus Varius Marcellus. In his early youth, he served as a priest for the Sun-god Ilāh hag-Gabal (in Latin, Elagabalus) in the hometown of his mother's family, Emesa. As a private citizen, he was known as Sextus Varius Avitus Bassianus. Upon becoming emperor, he took the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus. He was called Elagabalus only after his death.

On that night, Elagabalus is dressed in a loose, but heavily embroidered ankle-length garment with long sleeves. His eyes are heavily made up with kohl. When the scene starts, he is reclining on the floor drinking wine. His grandmother, the Syrian Princess Julia Maesa enters without being formally announced. She is also dressed in a loose ankle-length dress, but, contrary to Elagabalus, her garment is plain and her face is unpainted.

Elagabalus—(Standing up quickly:) What are you doing here? Where are your guards? Are you alone?

Julia Maesa—Yes.

—You've come to admire your work? You've played well. Thanks to you, the Praetorian Guards have locked up Cesar, your own grandson, in their temple. Here, the little whore won't hurt a soul; he won't hurt your reputation or that of Alexander Severus, my beloved cousin. Well done. Once more, you've won.

—Stop this game. I've come here to save you.

—Save me? And from what, may I ask? From your own machinations? Ever since you forced Alexander to accede to the throne by my side, you do everything to push me aside. I thought you hated the way I ran the Empire. Why would you want to save me now?

—I have new plans. I'm thinking of you and our family. I think I found a way to save you from the trap that the army...

—The army? The trap that you laid out for me.

—I gave no orders. They wanted to see Alexander. They feared for his life. You were unfair towards him; so it's understandable the Guards should want to protect him.

—If my cousin is safe, why are they keeping me prisoner? Are they scared?

—They no longer trust you. You know the importance of the army.

—Huh... Do I know it? They rush to support any kid to the throne and as soon as they are bored, they plot his death.

(Silence)

—Listen to me. Please, pay attention to what I have to say. Alexander can also reign. Since he is much more interested in affairs of the states, just share the throne with him. You will oversee religion and cults and you will be able to accomplish all your projects. You could be free. You could live happy.

—A throne is never two-seated. Furthermore, I could never “accomplish my projects,” as you put it, without the prestige of a full crown. When I get bored of playing the game of Rome, my cousin can then take over. But I still like this game and no one will determine the winner until I say so.

—But to govern isn't a game and winners don't exist.

—The players are real though.

—Listen to me...

—No, your plan is rejected, end of story.

—So what will you do?

—Nothing, sleep until I'm freed.

—And then?

—I will continue my work.

—These childish scenes of debauchery, is that what you call your “work”?

—Name it as you please; I'm not the author.

—And who is?

—The power. This power that predicted my destiny, leads my life, and gives me freedom.

—The oracle of your birth—if that’s what you call “power”—didn’t predict the depravities in which you wallow.

—The oracle implied it.

—Did it also imply that from an acclaimed accession to the throne, you should end up prostituting yourself in brothels? You married a Vestal Virgin, for Gods’ sake. And you sleep with that slave charioteer, Hierocles. Isn’t that depravity itself. (*Elagabalus doesn’t answer*) Or does this mean you’ve been plotting our end for a long time?

—I plot nothing. I’m only unrolling the fabric of my life. It was white at birth. It was then soiled with blood the day you decided to make me Emperor.

—It’s crimson red and sewn with gold thread the fabric you so carelessly soil with your vice.

—Crimson or bloodied, who cares? These aren’t gay colours or colours of hope...

—Why are you always so pessimistic?

—Because a pernicious evil demon insists on destroying me.

—What?

—Oh common! You know exactly what I’m talking about. You know... what’s her name... that Emesani princess who spends her time trying to kill me.

—And this princess is I, right?

—How astute! Well done! (*Silence*) Go on, admit it: if I’m here, it’s because of you. It’s part of your plan, isn’t it? So what’s it going to be? What’s the next act? Are you preparing a coup or something more sordid? Will you be abiding to the oracle or will you try to alter my destiny?

—There’s nothing to change. The oracle only predicted a difficult start.

—A fatal start, no?

—You are the Emperor of Rome. Nothing can touch you. All Cesars have known difficult moments. Think of Caracalla, my nephew, having to reign with his father and then his brother. Think of...

—And what fatal end befell my beloved cousin?

—(*Maesa doesn't reply, but continues:*) Think of the holiness of your priesthood. No one cumulated both powers before you. It's a unique opportunity to occupy your position, to have your unique rank. Save yourself Marcus Aurelius. Save your throne by renouncing these perverse pleasures. Stop wallowing in negative thoughts. Renew the faith you placed on *Ilāh hag-Gabal*. Isn't He now our very own *Sol Invictus*, the Sun-God of all Romans? Didn't we manage to place him even higher than Jupiter?

—My ties to *Ilāh hag-Gabal* have never been severed. With regards to saving me... It's too late.

—It's never too late. Power means opportunities, not curse.

—Power means nothing to me because I never wanted it in the first place. You gave it to me; remember? All my life you made sure I was in your debt; that everything I had was because of you. You fought hard to create what you see standing before you, this body, this thing: priest at 4, Emperor at 14! And now that you realize you've made a mistake, that you've backed the wrong horse, you try to get rid of me.

—Sun-God and Emperor, I made you. Devil, you've become.

—(*Laughing*) What? So I'm the only evil spirit here? My so-called wicked ways are... what? from birth? How dare you! Without you, I wouldn't have become the little degenerate you claim I am.

—Oh, grow up, Marcus Aurelius. Do you think I'm sufficiently naïve to fall for your little cries of injustice? You were on your own when you murdered your instructor. Killing a man isn't very virtuous, now is it? No one helped you. You acted alone. Do you remember?

—I didn't do it on purpose. He was asking too much of me. He was holding me too tight. He was forcing himself on me. He was like crazy. It was self-defense.

—He wasn't forcing himself on you; you lured him into your bed. It was you who perverted him.

—You don't know what happened. It wasn't as simple as that.

—Whatever happened, you killed him and you should have been punished. If it wasn't for the fact that you belong to the Severan family, you would have been executed.

—If it wasn't for the fact that you needed me, more like.

—Rome needed you after the mess left behind by that usurper, Macrinus. (*Silence*) In any case, who was there to clean the mess and

get rid of the body? (*Elegabalus does not answer. After a short silence:*) Oh, you think you play the victim's part don't you? Look at you, poor little thing, sacrificed on the altar of posterity. You little dreamer, you deserved to die.

—Don't all dreamers deserve death... (*Silence*) Come on; let's forget all this. Let's have some wine.

—Yes, why not.

(Elagabalus picks up the goblet he was using before Julia Maesa arrived and goes to the altar. With his back turned, he pours some wine. Suspecting foul play, Maesa joins him. As she approaches, he turns around and leaves her to choose her own goblet. She picks one up reluctantly. He takes the one left on the altar.)

Elagabalus—To the winner.

(Maesa doesn't reply. They both take their goblets to their mouths, but stop short from drinking.)

Julia Maesa—You don't drink?

—And you? (*Silence, and then, laughing*) We hate each other so much; it's laughable.

—One of them is poisoned, isn't it?

—Yes, but which one? (*Laughing*)

—(*She returns the goblet to the altar*). I have no intention of dying, but you, by the looks of it, you need a bit of help. So why don't you drink?

—So that's why you came to see me. You didn't come to save me, but to kill me, to quietly murder Cesar. You wanted to get rid of your little creature, didn't you?

—To kill you is a way of saving you.

—Death isn't salvation. Death justifies nothing. It's just the negation of life, that's all. (*A long silence*) Admit it, you only wanted to confirm the oracle, didn't you? The oracle predicted my death and you thought why not carry out the deed yourself. Is that what you wanted to accomplish?

—Stop it. I'm only thinking of our family. Your family. If we had worked together, none of this would have happened. It's for the sake of your posterity that I am here. Have you thought of that?

—My posterity or yours?

—Our family's.

—You make me laugh.

—Do you know what will happen now?

—What? If you don't leave with the news that I've officially relinquished part of my throne?

—Yes.

—(*With a smile*) Well, I will, as I said, sleep a little, and then the Praetorian Guard will kill me. And so what? Isn't this precisely what everyone expects?

—I was sparing you much suffering.

—But I want nothing from you. It would contradict my entire life and once again, I would be beholden to you. Don't you get it?

—Every since we left Emesa, you've never stopped defying me. Why?

—Look at me. Look at this body, this gown, this face, this make up. Doesn't it reflect your own image? Our Aramaic origins? Our decadent and beloved Rome? Of all that, I am made of; of all that, I asked nothing.

—You confuse everything. There's nothing wrong with our origins or Rome.

—No, but they are not me.

—And what is you, pray tell?

—Oh? I'd never thought you'd ask. Not much, just a faint breath maybe. In any case, there's clearly no longer time to find out what comes with this breath. (*Then, after a long silence.*) Can I ask you a favour? (*Maesa doesn't answer.*) You want my death. Well, have it, but only as I intend it, as I wish it.

—But...

—Listen. Return to the palace and tell the Prefect of Rome that I gave orders of killing any soldier who favours my cousin.

—You are sure of creating a mutiny.

—Isn't this what we deserve?

—You'll be lynched. It's not a pretty death.

—Aren't our lives any prettier?

—Rome doesn't need more blood. Our family doesn't need yet another scandal.

—Oh, but we do. This is the only way our family knows how to rule. Always more blood. Always more scandals.

—Don't be ridiculous. We are a force of good for Rome.

—A force of good, a force of evil, what's the difference? This is the way of Rome. (*Maesa doesn't answer. Elagabalus then says:*) Go on; do as I say. Rome wants it. History wants it. We are both just pawns, so forget all that stuff and do your duty for Rome.

Maesa looks at Elagabalus one last time and leaves the temple.

*Elagabalus was the first Emperor to admit women in the Senate. He was also the first Emperor to voluntarily distribute the wealth of the Imperial family to the masses during religious festivals. His reign lasted just under four years. He was slain by the Praetorian Guard at the age of 18 on the 11 March 222. His mother, Julia Soaemias, who visited him on that fateful morning, embraced him and perished with him. Their heads were cut off and their bodies, after being stripped naked, were dragged all over the city and thrown into the Tiber. Besides what the broad outlines of history tell us, it is not known what exactly provoked the Prefect of Rome in executing the Emperor Elagabalus. His cousin Alexander Severus acceded to the throne immediately following his death. From that day, no woman ever sat in the Senate again, and decrees were passed to prohibit them from ever doing so. The cult of *Ilāh hag-Gabal* was banned and so were all charitable donations at religious festivals. Julia Maesa died four years later, in 226. Like her sister Julia Domna before her, she was deified and bore the title of *Augusta avia Augusti*, the venerable mother of Augustus, the founder and first Emperor of Rome.*