

Death of an Emperor

It was a beautiful Ianuarius day—chilly, with a gentle breeze and clear skies. The early morning sun smiled kindly upon Castra Praetoria, barracks of the mighty Praetorian Guard—the powerful Roman legion charged with the protection of the emperor. Cassius Chaerea pulled himself out of bed, dressing himself quietly so as not to wake his three fellow tribunes who surrounded him. Cassius stepped outside, smiling to himself as he felt the nippy morning air on his skin. Today is a beautiful day, Cassius told himself, pacing towards the shrine of Mars. Today, nine days prior to the Kalends of Februarius in the year 794 ab urbe condita, (January 24, 41 CE) is the day I have dreamt of for nearly three years. Today is the day of my revenge.

Lucius Aruntius Stella, prefect (commander) of the Praetorian Guard, was next to wake. Pulling on a finely woven toga, he strode outside, hoping to eat a private breakfast free from the presence of his pesky and dim-witted underlings. He scowled as he saw that Cassius Chaerea was already awake, and was standing in front of the shrine of Mars, his head bowed earnestly in prayer. Lucius shook his head in disgust at the sight of Cassius. Cassius' stupidity is matched only by the violent zeal with which he despises Emperor Caligula, reflected Lucius. Although Lucius too had been convinced that Caligula could and must be deposed, he remained disgusted by Cassius's blundering ways. That stupid tribune will ruin this entire plot and get me killed, the prefect thought to himself.

Lucius reached into his satchel and pulled out the letter he had been storing there from his contacts in the Senate. The letter made it very clear that the Senate fully supported the Praetorian Guard's plot to overthrow Caligula—which Lucius and his men planned to do that very day. Lucius finished reading the letter and placed it back in his satchel. By this time, much of the Praetorian Guard had already emerged from their beds. A nervous excitement was in the air, as most guardsmen now knew that the assassination was to occur today.

Lucius ordered the Praetorian Guard to gather in front of the shrine of Mars and began to speak:

“Guardsmen,” he began in his deep, patrician accented voice. “This Praetorian Guard once supported Caligula. His first actions upon taking office that Martius of 790 AUC (March of 37 CE) were well received. As the more knowledgeable among you may know, Caligula ended Tiberius' unjust treason trials, recalled exiles, assisted taxpayers, and gave a bonus to the army and this Praetorian Guard—which was only fair considering that it was we who installed the man!”

Some officers laughed, and the prefect continued somewhat indifferently. “Yet Caligula's actions of late have become increasingly erratic. His paranoia has cost the lives of too many good men—men like Marcus Silanus, Tiberius Gemellus, Julius Graecinus, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus Gaetulicus, all of whom were executed unjustly. He wastes the empire's money on stately palaces for

himself. He wasted Roman lives in Judea, putting down a rebellion needlessly caused when he tried to get his statue placed in the Judean temple in Jerusalem. Worst of all, the emperor shows disrespect to Jupiter by calling himself by that god's name, and he forces the senate and the Roman people to worship him as such!"

All the Praetorian Guardsmen, of all ranks, shouted in fury at this insult to the king of the gods. Lucius continued.

"As the Praetorian Guard, we don't always fight to protect the emperor. We fight for Rome, for the gods, and for our honor. And today, Rome, the gods, and our honor compel us to remove Caligula. May Jupiter watch over us, and may Mars grant us strength."

It was a good speech, and even the rank and file guardsmen, who generally hated the arrogant prefect, applauded. Lucius, Cassius Chaerea, and several other officers left for the city on horseback, while the others, under the command of the Lucius' fellow prefect Marcus Arrecinus Clemens, would invade the palace and kill the emperor's family after Caligula himself had been slain.

As the select group of officers rode from the Castra into Rome proper, they quietly discussed the plot. Lucius announced that the goal was to kill enough members of the Julio-Claudian dynasty to demonstrate the strength of the Senate and Praetorian Guard, but not so many as to create anarchy.

At this, Cassius Chaerea piped up.

"Why can't we kill all those villains?" he asked, somewhat excitedly.

Lucius was angry. "Do as you're told, Cassius. I'm the commander, here."

At this, Cassius became quiet. While he had no intention of letting a single relative of Caligula go unscathed, he knew it would be unwise to argue further. He brooded silently, thinking of how much he hated Caligula and all his family. Cassius had been an officer under Germanicus, and had known Caligula from a young age. Ever since he was a teenager, Caligula had laughed at Cassius. He had called Cassius names, such as "Priapus" (the god of fertility) and "Venus" (the god of love) mocking Cassius as feminine due to his high pitched voice and timid demeanor. Cassius considered the irony of Caligula, someone who had never served in the army himself, questioning a veteran's masculinity. Cassius smiled to himself as he thought of how satisfying it would be to stab his tormentor in just a few hours.

The guardsmen arrived and dismounted at the theater where Caligula was addressing an acting troupe—the actors were part of an ever-increasing barrage of public spectacles Caligula paid for in a vain attempt to reverse the Roman people's opinion of him. The Praetorian Guardsmen gathered quietly outside the theatre, ready to attack when given the signal.

Caligula himself would be unarmed (or very lightly armed) and was sickly and weak to begin with. The guardsmen knew that the real challenge would be overcoming the Germanic guard, a small group loyal to Caligula that would be nearby. To avoid being thwarted, they would have to attack quickly.

On Lucius' signal, the Praetorian Guard attacked. They ran into the building and surrounded Caligula, shoving aside the small number of actors and advisors who tried to defend the unfortunate emperor.

Cassius had waited years for this. He happily drank in the expression on the emperor's face: a twisted expression of fear and fury that betrayed the emperor's obvious

insanity. Cassius himself appeared nearly as insane. The infuriated guardsman pulled out his sword and sunk the blade deep into Caligula's unarmored chest. Cassius's screams of delight mixed with the emperor's screams of terror to create sounds that would give nightmares to even the calmest of men.

The assembled crowd watched silently as Cassius stabbed the bleeding tyrant 30 times. By the time the Germanic guard arrived, there was nothing that could be done to save Caligula. Before he could be seized, Cassius fled the scene on horseback, and set out to participate in the massacre about to unfold at the emperor's palace.

At the palace, nothing could be done to save Caligula's family; the tyrant's wife was stabbed, and his infant daughter's head was smashed against a wall. Cassius laughed wickedly as he watched this.

But Cassius' bloodlust could not be fulfilled. As he had promised himself he would, he roamed the panicked Palatine Hill, seeking to kill any members of the emperor's family that he could.

Lucius, however, had had enough from his unrestrained junior officer. The crusty patrician ordered Cassius captured and locked up, to be handed over to the next emperor for punishment.

Cassius had expected this fate. Sure enough, Claudius, Caligula's aging uncle, succeeded his assassinated nephew and ordered Cassius executed. Cassius's final request, that he be stabbed by the same sword with which he had slain Caligula, was granted. As the sword sunk into Cassius, he reflected on the pain he felt, and knew that his nemesis had felt that same excruciating pain, from the very same sword. A smile crossed his face. Cassius died a happy man.

Works Cited

"Caligula." Wikipedia. 24 Nov. 2007. 25 Nov. 2007
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caligula>>.

"Praetorian Guard." Wikipedia. 24 Nov. 2007. 22 Nov. 2007
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caligula>>.

"Castra Praetoria." University of Chicago. 25 Nov. 2007
<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/Europe/Italy/Lazio/Roma/Rome/_Texts/PLATOP*/Castra_Praetoria.html>.

"Caligula." Columbia Encyclopeda.