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Blood & Steel

Written by Harry Sidebottom

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HARRY
SIDEBOTTOM

THRONE OF THE CAESARS

BLOOD & STEEL



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While some of the events and characters are based on
historical incidents and figures, this novel is entirely a work of fiction.

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Do not fear god,
Do not worry about death;
What is good is easy to get, and
What is terrible is easy to endure

Philodemus (Herculaneum Papyri 1005, 4.9–14)

One could press on or draw back in a private enterprise, and commit oneself more deeply or less at will, in accordance with the prospects of the moment. But in the pursuit of an empire there was no mean between the summit and the abyss

Tacitus, *Histories* 2.74

CHAPTER 1



Rome
The Palatine Hill,

The Day before the Nones of March, AD *238*

It was still dark. The Praetorian Prefect liked to walk in the imperial gardens before dawn. No attendants were with him, and he carried no torch. It was a moment of calm and solitude, a time for reflection, before the duties of the day, the duties that always seemed to stretch away like a vexatious journey with no evident ending.

Vitalianus often thought about retirement, about living quietly in the country with his wife and daughters. He pictured the house in Etruria. The Via Aurelia and the busy market town of Telamon were only a couple of miles away over the hill, but they might have belonged in a different country or another age. The villa lay between the shore and the terraced slopes, looking out over the sea. It had been built by his grandfather. Vitalianus had added two new wings and a bath house. The estate now extended inland along both banks of the Umbro. It was ideal for retirement, for reading and writing, appreciating the views, for passing time

with his wife, and enjoying the company of his daughters in the last few years before they married. No place was better suited for a man to lay down the cares of office.

Certainly Vitalianus had earned a time of leisure. His career had been long – commander of an auxiliary cohort in Britain, legionary tribune with the 3rd Augustan in Africa, Prefect of a cavalry unit in Germania, Procurator of imperial finances in Cyrenaica, four years with the Moorish cavalry, leading them through the eastern campaign and then to the Rhine – decades of service, across the breadth of the empire. He was no longer young: past fifty, and needed to rest. But duty still called, and the additions and improvements to his patrimony had not come cheap. The stipend and other profits of another three, perhaps four years as Praetorian Prefect, and he could call it a day.

The white marble borders of the paths shone in the darkness. The cunningly sculpted box hedges and the fruit trees were indistinct black shapes, the plane trees and the ivy that linked them a solid black wall. It was quiet in the Hippodrome, just the rill of water in the fountains; almost hard to believe he stood in the centre of a city with a million inhabitants. Vitalianus was glad he had removed the previous Emperor's aviaries. The murmuring and shifting of the doves – had there really been twenty thousand of them? – had disturbed his morning walks. It was typical of Alexander that he had occupied his time issuing imperial pronouncements about the birds, sanctimoniously boasting how the sale of eggs financed his collection, even produced a modest income, while his mother had stolen fortunes from the treasury, and great swathes of the east were overrun by the Persians, and German tribes put the northern provinces to the torch. Vitalianus had not been party to the plot, but Alexander was better off dead.

Stopping by a marble nymph, Vitalianus absentmindedly

ran a hand over her smooth thigh. He could find his way around these twisting walks blindfold. His thoughts took their own course. Risen from the ranks, Maximinus might be uncultured, even crude and violent, but he was a better Emperor than his predecessor. At least the Thracian could fight; for the last three years he had done nothing but campaign beyond the Rhine and Danube. Vitalianus had done well out of the regime; promoted first to governor of Mauretania Caesariensis, then to deputy Praetorian Prefect. It was a remarkable achievement for an equestrian from a backwater of Italy, a man with few significant backers. A member of the second order should legitimately aspire to nothing higher. And Vitalianus continued to serve the regime diligently. The endless court cases that awaited him today and almost every day were only the start.

With the majority of the praetorians accompanying the field army, it had proved difficult for Vitalianus to maintain order in Rome. The remaining one thousand men were not enough to disperse the crowds occasioned by certain arrests, or to clear the mobs occupying those temples whose treasures were to be requisitioned to help pay for the war. Efficiency would be served if he could issue orders to the six thousand men of the Urban Cohorts as well. But that would never happen. The very first Emperor, Augustus, had separated the command of the troops stationed in Rome. An equestrian Prefect led the Praetorians, while a Senatorial Prefect of the City controlled the Urban Cohorts. One officer watched the other, and the Emperor could be reassured that no individual could seize the Eternal City, at least not without an armed struggle. To be sure, things had been better once Sabinus had replaced Pupienus as Prefect of the City. The Urban Cohorts and the Praetorians might have no love for each other, but under firm leadership together they could contain the turbulent *plebs urbana*. The hand of Maximinus lay heavy

on the city, but the northern war demanded sacrifices, and so far the Emperor had not struck down those who served him loyally. Safety lay in prompt obedience, no matter what the order. Three or four more years and Vitalianus could withdraw from the fray.

A scream of gulls brought Vitalianus back to his surroundings. The sky was lightening. It was time to take up the reins. He adjusted his sword-belt, the very visible badge of his office, hitched up his tunic, and walked up the stairs to where his secretary and two praetorians waited. Together they set off through the heart of the palace.

Apart from a handful of servants and guards, there was no one in the main imperial audience chamber. The echoing near-emptiness revealed its more than human scale. Three storeys of columns soared up a hundred feet to where the great beams of cedar supporting the wide span of the ceiling were lost in shadow. At the far end of the hall the gathering light outlined the monumental door through which an Emperor would appear to the press of his subjects assembled below on the palace forecourt. Opposite the opening, a seated statue of Maximinus occupied the apse where the living ruler would sit enthroned to receive the Senate and favoured petitioners, should he ever return to Rome. Along the walls, the gods in marble gazed down from their niches at their adamantine colleague.

Vitalianus performed adoration, bowing his head and blowing a kiss from his fingertips. Suddenly he wondered what it would be like to hold court in this hall, not to bow but to receive obeisance, to be lord of all you surveyed. Two Emperors had risen from the equestrian order. As a child Maximinus had herded goats. Vitalianus' mind shied away. Even to entertain such thoughts was treason. A careless word or gesture, something muttered in your sleep, any of them could lead to an accusation. From there events would run

their course; a closed carriage to the north, the pincers and claws wielded by skilled hands, until you begged for the executioner's sword. Your head set on a pike. The crows feasting on your eyes. He straightened up, and marched purposefully towards the door to the neighbouring basilica.

When he entered, the hum of conversation died. The first petitioners had been admitted. This hall was smaller. Twin Corinthian colonnades running down the long walls further encroached on the floor space. Among those waiting, he saw Timesitheus.

As he marched down the nearer colonnade, Vitalianus brought the case to mind. The little Greek was embroiled in a private dispute over an inheritance. Timesitheus was in charge of the grain supply. His opponent was a leading Senator. All things being equal, neither was a man one would choose to alienate. But things were not equal. Timesitheus had a sworn enemy in Domitius, the Prefect of the Imperial Camp, and the latter was one of the few patrons Vitalianus had close to the Emperor. And there was a personal animosity. Three years before in the *consilium*, in front of all the councillors of the Emperor, Timesitheus had argued against the appointment of Vitalianus as governor of Mauretania Caesariensis. The *Graeculus* had to be desperate to seek his aid now. The desperation would do him no good.

A centurion of the Praetorians stepped forward as Vitalianus approached the apse where the tribunal stood.

'Soldiers have arrived from the north, Prefect. The despatches bear the imperial seal. Their officer says he has a private message of the utmost importance from Maximinus Augustus himself. It concerns the security of the *Res Publica*. They are waiting in the portico outside.'

Vitalianus nodded. 'Tell them I will hear them in a moment.' He ascended the raised dais, and faced the hall. 'Forgive me, the court will delay its sitting. Orders have come

from the most noble Augustus.' Despite his politeness, a sea of anxious faces gazed up at him. They knew as well as he what it meant: more arrests, more leading men rushed under close guard to the north, never to be seen again. It could be any one of them. The *Graeculus* Timesitheus, his senatorial opponent and every man present would be consulting his conscience, calling to mind every recent conversation, no matter how trivial. They did not fear just for themselves. All knew the dreadful repercussions for the family of the victims: the headman's block, or, at best, exile, confiscation and abject poverty.

Outside the sun had risen. The light flashed back from the highly polished cladding of the walls. Treachery and fear were nothing new in Rome. Long ago the Emperor Domitian had had the white reflective stone brought from distant Cappadocia. Like all Emperors, he had wanted to see what happened behind his back.

Two soldiers were talking to the centurion and the four Praetorian guards by the rear doors of the basilica. They fell silent, and snapped to attention, when they saw Vitalianus. The centurion gestured out beyond the portico into the open space.

An officer was standing by the central fountain. He had his back to Vitalianus, and seemed to be studying how the waters ran down the island that depicted Sicilia and gave the courtyard its name. At the sound of footfalls, he turned. He was young, perhaps in his mid-twenties, dark haired and good-looking. He was vaguely familiar, but Vitalianus could not place him.

'Prefect.' The young officer saluted. Close up, he was pale and looked tired. His tunic was travel stained. Among the ornaments on his military belt was a memento mori, a skeleton in silver. He handed over the despatch.

Vitalianus turned the diptych in his hands: ivory and gold,

clumsily sealed in imperial purple with the eagle of the Caesars. He broke the seal, unfolded the hinged block, and read.

Imperator Gaius Iulius Verus Maximinus to Publius Aelius Vitalianus, our most loving and loyal Prefect of the Praetorians. While marching against the Sarmatians, it was with great sadness we received information of yet another conspiracy. The eminence of the traitors precludes writing their names. The bearer of this letter will tell you their identity. Now I entreat you that in the same spirit in which you were chosen as Prefect and have conducted your duties you will spare no efforts in apprehending these evil-minded malefactors and convey them to us, so that with careful inquiry we can ascertain how far they have spread their sacrilegious poison.

Our son Verus Maximus Caesar sends his greetings, and his wife Iunia Fadilla, too, greets both you and your wife. To your daughters we will send a present, worthy both of their virtue and your own. We command you to hold the troops in the city in their allegiance to the Res Publica and to ourselves, my most loyal, most dear, and loving friend.

Below the courtly hand of the imperial secretary was the rough scrawl MAXIMINUS AUGUSTUS.

'Who?' Vitalianus said.

Unexpectedly the officer smiled. 'The Prefect of the City, Sabinus, and he is only the first.'

Vitalianus looked up sharply. A movement caught his eye reflected in the wall opposite. He turned. The two soldiers had drawn their swords.

A whisper of steel. Dropping the diptych, Vitalianus tugged his own blade from its scabbard. 'Guards!' Yelling, he spun back, and blocked the cut aimed at his head.

'Guards!' He parried a thrust. Hearing running feet, he

risked a glance over his shoulder. The two soldiers would be on him in a moment. The centurion and the Praetorians had not moved.

A searing pain in his right arm told Vitalianus that he had paid for his inattention. Somehow he fended off another blow.

'Why?'

The young officer said nothing.

'I have done everything. Never betrayed him.'

Vitalianus felt the steel slice into his left thigh from behind. He staggered. The blood hot on his leg.

'Why?'

Another slash into his left leg, and he collapsed. His weapon gone from his hand, he curled on the ground, one hand half covering his head, the other outstretched in supplication. What of his daughters? They were children, virgins. It was unlawful to execute virgins. Gods, not the fate of the children of Sejanus. No, dear gods, no!

One of the soldiers moved to finish him.

'Wait.'

Vitalianus peered from behind his fingers up at the speaker.

'It is my responsibility.' The young officer rolled him onto his back, put his boot on his chest, the tip of his sword at his throat.

Vitalianus looked into his eyes. 'Spare my children. Please spare my daughters.'

'Yes,' the officer said, and thrust down.

CHAPTER 2



Rome
The Palatine Hill,

The Day before the Nones of March, AD*238*

'Follow me.'

The two soldiers moved to clean their blades.

'Do not sheath them,' Menophilus said. 'The blood needs to be seen.'

They walked back, their gory reflections fractured and disjointed in the mirrored walls of the courtyard.

Behind the Praetorians, close-packed faces peered out of the two doorways of the basilica. Silent, round-eyed and open-mouthed, they gazed beyond the military men at the corpse lying at the base of the fountain.

'The Prefect has been executed. Command of the Emperor.' Menophilus spoke to the centurion of the Praetorians. He kept his words low, clipped and military, as if about some oft-repeated routine. 'There is a new watchword: *Liberty*. Remain at your posts. Await further orders.'

'*Libertas!*' The Praetorians chorused without emotion.

The first of the civilians wedged in the doorways were

ducking back out of sight into the basilica. So far, so good, Vitalianus was dead. He could go over the implications of that again later, but now Menophilus and his men had to get away. Soon the palace would be in uproar. Unexpected bloodshed often unleashed random violence, and there was never any reckoning on the volatility of a frightened mob.

Menophilus raised his voice to address the onlookers. 'The court is adjourned until further notice. The traitor has been executed. There will be no further arrests. There is nothing to fear. None of you will be detained further.'

The main gate of the palace was off to his right. To reach it, you had to go through the great vestibule, and that would be crammed with petitioners, clients and guards; hundreds of men waiting attendance on the Praetorian Prefect. When word arrived of his death, fear alone would create chaos.

Menophilus nodded to his men, and turned left. It was no distance to the smaller western gate, but he found it hard not to run. Walking slowly, the two soldiers marching behind, the bloodied sword ridiculously held up in front, he felt like an unconvincing actor in a tragedy. Perhaps a mask would have helped.

The small, octagonal vestibule was empty. The doormen were nowhere to be seen, and the Praetorians here had deserted their posts. Already discipline had slipped into the vacuum created by the killing of the Emperor's main officer in the city. There was a chance for looting. Avarice was ever a strong passion.

Outside, Menophilus turned right, glanced over his shoulder at his followers, and broke into a run. Cloak in his left hand, sword in his right, he rounded the corner of the palace. A tall wall, marble faced and blank, stretched away. From further up the façade, from among the balustrades, statues and columns, came bursts of noise and half-glimpsed movements. He angled away to the left, across the forecourt,

towards the arch that straddled the path down to the Sacred Way and the Forum.

Menophilus started to shamble, his breathing became laboured. The soldiers closed up on either side. Left to their own devices, they would have overtaken him. One had a curious action. Neck craned forward, knees high-stepping, it reminded Menophilus of the big, flightless African birds exhibited in the amphitheatre. The other covered the ground more normally.

Under the arch, Menophilus had to stop. Hands on thighs, he doubled up. The flagstones blurred in his vision. Each breath dragged pain up through his chest. It was not the exertion. They had only run a short distance. It was the enormity of what he had done; the killing of an unsuspecting man. Menophilus hawked and spat. He felt disorientated and sick. There was blood smeared up his arms.

The soldier who ran like an ostrich cleared his throat and shifted his feet. Menophilus knew they should not delay, but could not force himself to continue. The ostriches went into the arena without awareness of their fate. The hunters used a special half-moon arrowhead to sever their necks. Gods, this would not do. Menophilus had to rein in his thoughts, regain his self-control. To Hades with flightless birds and unawareness. Behave like a man. Flanks still heaving like a dog, he hauled himself more upright.

Downslope, what he could see of the valley of the Forum still lay in early-morning shadow. There must have been any number of examples in its history of men who had done terrible things for the right reasons, had committed awful crimes for the good of the *Res Publica*. Sick to his stomach, not one came to Menophilus. There must be innumerable instances of men constrained by their conscience to make choices that had put them outside the law. The Forum had been the heart of the free Republic. For centuries men could

speak and act as their principles dictated, until Augustus had seduced power up to the Palatine. That was long ago. It could no more be reversed than the killing of Vitalianus. Neither could be changed by Menophilus. In that light, both were irrelevant. He stood straight, gripped the hem of his cloak, and set off again. Several times at the games he had seen ostriches continue to run after they had been decapitated.

As they reached the Sacred Way, with the suddenness of some fearful epiphany, six armed men emerged from the Arch of Titus. At the sight of the naked steel in their hands, Menophilus skidded to a halt, jerked his own blade up into a blocking position. At his shoulders, the soldiers did the same.

'Is Vitalianus dead?'

'Yes,' Menophilus said.

'We should have executed Sabinus too,' Valerian said.

'Gordian's orders were explicit.' Menophilus lowered his sword.

'A mistake. The Prefect of the City commands six thousand men in the Urban Cohorts.'

Menophilus suppressed his irritation. 'You were there, you know as well as me, neither Gordian nor his father would hear of it.'

Valerian shrugged. 'Potens should have been killed as well. He has another seven thousand in the Watch.'

Silently, not even moving his lips, Menophilus recited the Greek alphabet. After Gordian had been proclaimed Emperor with his father in Africa, the most important of his initial orders had been this mission to take control of Rome. No one but the Praetorian Prefect was to be killed. The new regime was to be one of principle, bound by restraint, different from the bloodstained tyranny that had gone before. Menophilus struggled for the words to make Valerian understand. 'If we had killed them, we would be no better than Vitalianus, and Gordian would be no better than Maximinus.'

'A mistake,' Valerian's complaints continued their ponderous course. 'When the Liberators cut down Caesar, they spared Mark Antony, and everyone knows how that turned out. Why kill Vitalianus, when there are less than a thousand Praetorians in Rome, and leave alive two men just as close to the regime of Maximinus, who between them . . .'

'Enough!' They had been through all this. There was no time now for Menophilus to go from alpha to omega again. 'We have our orders, and we will obey them.'

Valerian scowled. Evidently he did not relish being interrupted by the younger man.

'We all know our roles.' Menophilus nevertheless felt it was his duty to repeat them. Gordian had entrusted this to him. There could be no mistakes. 'Valerian, there is little time, but it is not far to the Caelian. Fulvius Pius will not have left his house yet. With the other Consul away, tell him the *Res Publica* depends on him. When you are certain Fulvius Pius will summon the Senate, collect his neighbour Pupienus as well, and escort them both to the Curia. Everything now depends on how quickly we act.'

Valerian nodded.

Menophilus turned to the one other present who was not a soldier. 'Maecius, when you reach the Carinae, go straight to the home of Balbinus. The patrician is notoriously indolent. He may be reluctant. Flatter him, bribe him, do whatever. Use threats if necessary. Balbinus has many connections among the Senators. We have to have him at the meeting. Only when you are sure he will attend, go to the house of the Gordiani, and warn Maecia Faustina. Lock and bar the windows and doors of the *Domus Rostrata*. Arm the slaves. Stay with your kinswoman. Remember the safety of Gordian's sister rests on you.'

The gold ring on Maecius' hand flashed as he waved to

acknowledge his orders. Then both the young equestrian and Valerian turned to go.

Trying to hide any misgivings, Menophilus watched the two men depart. Each was trailed by his utterly inadequate escort of just two soldiers. The next few hours might see them all dead. Duty demanded that he send Maecius to the house of Balbinus before securing the *Domus Rostrata*. Yet it was not an easy decision. Gordian was not close to his sister, but he might find it hard to forgive Menophilus if something happened to her or his ancestral home.

Regarding Valerian's broad back as it receded under the Arch and off up the Sacred Way brought a certain comfort. The older man provided a wordless lesson in duty. Valerian's young son was a hostage in the imperial school on the Palatine. The day held the sure promise of violence; at the least riot, and perhaps savage repression and revenge. And Valerian was going to summon the Consul of Rome from the Caelian, instead of rushing to protect his son.

It was time to go. Menophilus regarded his two fellow assassins. Filthy, reeking with blood, eyes popping and wild; his own aspect would be no better. He motioned them to follow, and marched out into the Forum.

'*Libertas!*' he roared, and raised his fatal blade to the skies.

'*Libertas!*' the soldiers echoed.

A row of astrologers, dream diviners and others of similar callings sat or stood in front of the House of the Vestals.

'*Libertas!*' Menophilus cried to them. 'Citizens, your freedom is restored. Here in Rome we have cut down your oppressor. The Prefect Vitalianus is dead.'

They regarded him with misgiving, these down-at-heel peddlers of divine foresight. Nothing in their self-proclaimed expertise had given them any warning. They exchanged anxious looks. A couple began to gather up the tools of their trades.

‘The tyrant is dead!’ Menophilus brandished his sword. ‘The news has come from the North. Maximinus has been slain. Beyond the Danube, his corpse lies mutilated and unburied.’

As one, galvanized by his pronouncement, the charlatans scooped and scrabbled up their meagre accoutrements. Wordless, they fled in all directions.

‘Maximinus the Thracian is dead!’ Menophilus shouted at their scurrying figures.

CHAPTER 3



Africa
Carthage,

The Day before the Nones of March, AD*238*

Live out of the public eye, the sage had said.

It was nine days since Gordian had plunged a dagger into the neck of the Procurator who had been called Paul the Chain, nine days since he had proclaimed his father and in return been made Emperor himself. In the nondescript bedroom, in the second-rate provincial town of Thysdrus in Africa, the crowd had acclaimed him Augustus, all bloodied as he was, his toga like a butcher's apron.

A wise man will not engage in politics, Epicurus had cautioned. Gordian had made his decision. There could be no return to the shadows. Paul the Chain had threatened his friend Mauricius with ruin, and worse. It would have not stopped there. Gordian had been compelled to act.

The crowds had been waiting several miles outside the walls of Carthage. They were all civilians and were ranked along the roadside; first the magistrates, priests, and the rest of the

councillors, then the young men of good families, and finally all the other inhabitants in their various lower degrees. They had been there for hours, in good order, not a soldier in sight. At long last, in an outpouring of joy and perhaps some relief, the population had had their opportunity to pour libations, blow kisses, and call out words of good omen. To the music of flutes, they had accompanied the cavalcade to the city, spreading the petals of different flowers under the hooves of the horses. Melodious and good-natured in the spring sunshine, the procession had snaked under the aqueduct, between the tombs, through the Hadrumetum Gate and finally to the Circus.

With his father, Gordian stepped onto the purple carpet. They walked with slow and measured tread, befitting their combined dignity and the parent's age. Following the fasces and the sacred fire, they proceeded up the many steps, through the dark interior of the building, up to the imperial box.

The light was blinding as they came out into the Circus. It surrounded them, its marble dazzling under the African sun. The noise and heat rolled up from the tiers, and buffeted the two men. Forty thousand or more voices were raised in welcome. *Hail, the Augusti, our saviours. Hail Gordian the Elder. Hail Gordian the Younger. May the gods preserve father and son.* Nicknames were chanted, respectful for the senior – *Hail, the new Scipio. Hail, Cato reborn* – less so for his progeny – *Hail, Priapus; the* princeps *of pleasure*. With no soldiers on hand to keep them within bounds, it was their nature to call out what they pleased. The Carthaginians were second only to the Alexandrians in their irreverence.

Gordian solicitously took his father's elbow, and supported him to their thrones. As they settled themselves on the unforgiving ivory, their entourage filed in behind them.

The crowd quietened. Down on the sand, a city elder

stood forth. The white of his toga shimmered in the sun, the narrow purple stripe on his tunic an incision as black as blood.

'With fortunate omens you have come, our Emperors, each as brilliant as a ray of the sun that appears to us on high.'

The space was vast, but the orator had a strong voice, and the acoustics were good. The words carried up to the Emperors and to those in the seats of honour. The rest would have to be content with reports and saying they had been there.

'When night and darkness covered the world, the gods raised you up to their fellowship, and together your light has dissolved our fears. All men can breathe again, as you dispel all dangers.'

The enumeration of past miseries would take some time; the iniquities of the deceased Procurator here in Africa, the savageries and stupidities of the tyrant Maximinus Thrax across the breadth of the empire. Amplification was ever the watchword for a rhetor on safe ground.

Gordian inclined his head slightly, and regarded his father's profile, the strong chin and aquiline nose. Gordian was glad that at the outset he had thought to have an artist draw them both, and had sent the portraits ahead both to Carthage and to Rome. The coins from the imperial mint would convey a suitable majesty. Here, seated on the throne, Gordian Senior was the very image of an Emperor; serene yet alert. His father had stood up well to the rigours of the hasty journey, but close up Gordian could see the dark smudges under the eyes, the sunken cheeks, and the slight tremor in one hand.

His father was old, possibly too old to bear the weight of the purple. Gordian had neither expected nor wanted his father to elevate him to the throne as well. Yet his father

was eighty, and it would have been wrong not to shoulder some of the burden. Now, together, they would see the race out, fight the contest to the finish.

On the evening of the acclamation, when they were as near alone as Emperors could be, in just the company of four or five of their immediate *familia*, they had talked. The conversation remained with Gordian.

'I am sorry, Father. If I had let the Chain kill Mauricius, we would have been next.'

His father had been calm. 'I would have done the same, if I was still young.'

Gordian had been compelled to explain, to try to win his father's approval. 'A life of fear, without ease of mind, is not worth living. To live as a coward can not be endured. Once the Chain was dead, there was no choice but open revolt, the proclamation of a new Emperor. When a tyrant threatens your friends and family, your own equanimity, the very *Res Publica* itself, a man can not continue to live quietly out of the public eye. A wise man will not engage in politics, unless something intervenes.'

'Although I do not share your Epicureanism, you are right.' A long life had armoured the self-control of his father. 'We are wealthy. The *Domus Rostrata* in Rome, the great villa on the *Via Praenestina*, confiscated by the imperial treasury, they alone would fund a legion for the northern wars. Since your sister's husband was condemned for treason last year, we are marked down for destruction. You did the right thing. Your mother would have been proud of you, as I am.'

'But I have endangered us all.'

'There is no time now for regrets. You must act swiftly. Seize Rome. Rally the eastern armies to our cause. I am old and tired. All depends on you.'

'It may end in disaster.'

His father had smiled. 'At my age death holds no terrors. Perhaps it would be no mean thing to end my days on the throne of the Caesars. *Let me at least not die without a struggle, inglorious, but do some big thing first, that men to come shall know of it.*'

A flamboyant gesture by the orator brought Gordian out of his memories. Slowly, for imperial majesty precluded sudden movements, and out of the corners of his eyes, he studied those who stood behind the thrones. Brennus, his father's silent bodyguard, as ever was at hand. The persistent rumour that Brennus was an illegitimate child of Gordian the Elder was fuelled by the striking resemblance between his legitimate son and the bodyguard, although the old man laughed the story off.

Gordian took in the rest of the party. Arrian and Sabinianus, the two legates, stood together, as close as the Cercopes, the mischievous twins of myth. Despite the solemnity of the occasion, some hint of patrician amusement could be detected in their faces. Serenus Sammonicus, his old tutor, was the same age as his father, but appeared older and very far from well. Aemilius Severinus, the commander of the *speculatores*, was not young. He must be in his sixties. But he looked tough and fit. Phillyrio, as his scouts called Severinus for some long-forgotten reason, had been scoured and tanned like leather by a lifetime patrolling the desert frontier. At the end was Mauricius, the local landowner whose persecution had been the catalyst. Few enough to support a revolution, none of them, apart from the legates, of any great rank, but loyalty ever counted for more than mere numbers.

'On his father's side he traces his descent from the house of the Gracchi, on his mother's from the Emperor Trajan.' The oration had moved to the origins of Gordian Senior,

another safe topic for fulsome exploration. 'His own father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather, his wife's father and grandfather, and likewise another of his wife's grandfathers and two of her great-great-grandfathers, were Consuls.'

The offices, deeds and virtues of every one of these individuals would be recalled, exaggerated, or invented. Gordian seemed to have been listening forever, to have been Emperor for eternity.

Gordian had been busy beyond measure. That first day, before the citizens of Thysdrus could swear their oaths of allegiance, majestic regalia had had to be created. It had been easy enough to find both a small, portable altar for the sacred fire and rods to bind around axes to make the fasces. As governor his father had curule chairs which could serve as imperial thrones. A purple cloak already had been taken from the sanctuary of Caelestis, from the shoulders of the goddess, and draped around his father. Another, most likely of similar provenance, was produced for himself. An imperial seal had been more problematic. But the town gaol had contained a forger – as long as there were coins, there would be counterfeiters – and, once pardoned and reunited with the tools of his illicit trade, it had taken him no time to create a simulacrum; in metal not precious stone, but the impression it made had seemed adequate.

From the ceremonial Gordian had turned to the practical. After his father had retired to his chamber, he had worked through the night. Many, many letters had been dictated and signed; to all the leading communities in the Province of Africa, to the commanders of the eight small military units stationed there. More thought had been devoted to those destined for the more than forty governors of other provinces across the *imperium*. Yet the most care of all had gone into the sentiments and wording of those that were to go to the capital, both those that bore Gordian's signature and those that carried a false

subscript. Menophilus and Valerian, accompanied by his equestrian kinsman Maecius, had left for Rome at dawn.

The imperial party had remained at Thysdrus for just two more days. Long enough to find recruits to bring the horse guards up to two hundred swords. Renamed the Equites Singulares Augusti, Mauricius had been given their command. A makeshift Praetorian Guard, five hundred strong, had been formed out of the local youth association. The Iuvenes might not be seasoned soldiers, but they had a modicum of military training, and neither their appearance nor enthusiasm could be faulted.

The new Emperors, with escort and entourage, had gone to Hadrumetum, then up the coast road to Horrea Caelia and Pupput, before turning north-west to Ad Aquas, to skirt the gulf of Utica, and so to Carthage. Six days hard travelling, Gordian in the saddle, his father going in a fast carriage before mounting a horse for the entry into the city. The speed of their journey meant that only those communities through which they had passed had yet acknowledged them. But professions of fealty had come from Fuscinus, Prefect of the 15th Cohort of Emesenes based at Ammaedara, and similar messages had been waiting for them at Ad Aquas from the commanders of the Urban Cohort and the detachment of the 3rd Legion Augusta stationed in Carthage. So far things could not have gone better. Gordian was proud of what he had accomplished. Like Mark Antony, he could rouse himself from his pleasures when necessity demanded.

'As Horatius held the bridge, Gordian stood alone amidst the slaughter and held the gate at Ad Palmam. Never tiring, his man-killing hands struck down the foe, threw back the barbarian horde.'

Gordian had been half aware of the flow of the oration: the excellent omens – in fact they had been appalling, for those who believed in such things – the long distant martial

exploits of his father. But now it had reached his own triumphs, he was all ears.

'As Alexander scaled the Sogdian Rock, so our young Emperor climbed the sheer cliff at Esuba. Many was the companion he caught as they slipped, saved from a certain death. When he attained the summit, the brigands discovered neither their remoteness nor their inaccessibility provided any defence against the old-fashioned Roman courage of our Augustus.'

All too soon a new theme was introduced. 'Justice is a portion of his humanity: for when victorious, the Emperor did not repay the aggressors in kind, but divided his actions in just proportion between punishment and humanity.'

Gordian stopped listening. Not a dog had been left alive in the lair of the bandit Canartha. His thoughts scouted ahead. They would not stay long in Carthage. Leaving Sabinianus as the new governor of Africa, as soon as word came from Menophilus, they would sail for Rome. There they would muster the military forces in the city: the Urban Cohorts, the men of the Watch, those Praetorians and the soldiers of the 2nd Legion who were not away in the North, the detachments of sailors, and however many *frumentarii* were in their camp on the Caelian. They should raise new troops, perhaps recruit some from the gladiatorial schools. Once they had secured the allegiance of the two great fleets at Misenum and Ravenna, they could hold Italy, and wait for the governors across the empire to declare themselves.

'Just as the sons of Asclepius rescue the sick, just as fugitives obtain security in the inviolate precincts of divine power . . .'

Agitated, despite himself, Gordian could find no meaning in the words. Had the gods existed, Gordian would have prayed for news. Events were beyond his control. Everything now depended on what was happening elsewhere; in Rome,

in governors' palaces across the empire, and with the army in the distant North. At least three governors were closely bound to the house of the Gordians. Claudius Julianus of Dalmatia, Fidus of Thrace, and Egnatius Lollianus of Bithynia-Pontus had no legions, but their example might sway the undecided. And in Rome the *plebs urbana* would be well disposed. Some time ago, his father had distributed a hundred Sicilian and a hundred Cappadocian racehorses among the Circus factions. And he had endeared himself across Italy by giving four days of stage-plays and *Juvenalia* in the cities of Campania, Etruria, Umbria, Flaminia, and Picenum, all at his own expense.

'Because of our Emperors, marriages are chaste, fathers have legitimate offspring, spectacles, festivals, and competitions are conducted with proper splendour and due moderation. People choose a style of life like that which they observe in the Emperors. Piety to the gods is increased, the earth is tilled in peace, the sea sailed without danger.'

There was no mistaking the tardy arrival of the epilogue. Gordian shifted his numb buttocks. Not long now. Just the already intimated new honorifics, and the interminable speech would be finished. Gordian was dust-stained, tired and hot; the baths would be welcome.

'We fear neither barbarians nor enemies. The Emperors' arms are a safer fortress than our city walls. What greater blessing must one ask from the gods than the safety of the Emperors? Only that they incline our rulers to accept . . .'

Gordian hoped Parthenope and Chione were not too fatigued from the journey. He had earned the special relaxation from the cares of office that his mistresses could provide.

'Although too modest to share with his father the titles of Pontifex Maximus or Father of the Country, however, let the son also take the name Africanus to commemorate the country of his accession, and that of Romanus to celebrate

the city of his birth and make evident the contrast from the barbarous tyrant of hated memory. All hail Imperator Caesar Marcus Antonius Gordianus Sempronianus Romanus Africanus Pius Felix Augustus, father and son.'

As his father stood to accept on both their behalf the not-unexpected titles, Gordian sensed a disturbance behind him in the imperial box. Suillius, the tribune in charge of the detachment from the 3rd Augusta, leant over his shoulder, and spoke in his ear.

'Augustus, the legionaries will not leave their barracks. They are tearing down your new portraits from the standards. Only your presence can stop the mutiny.'