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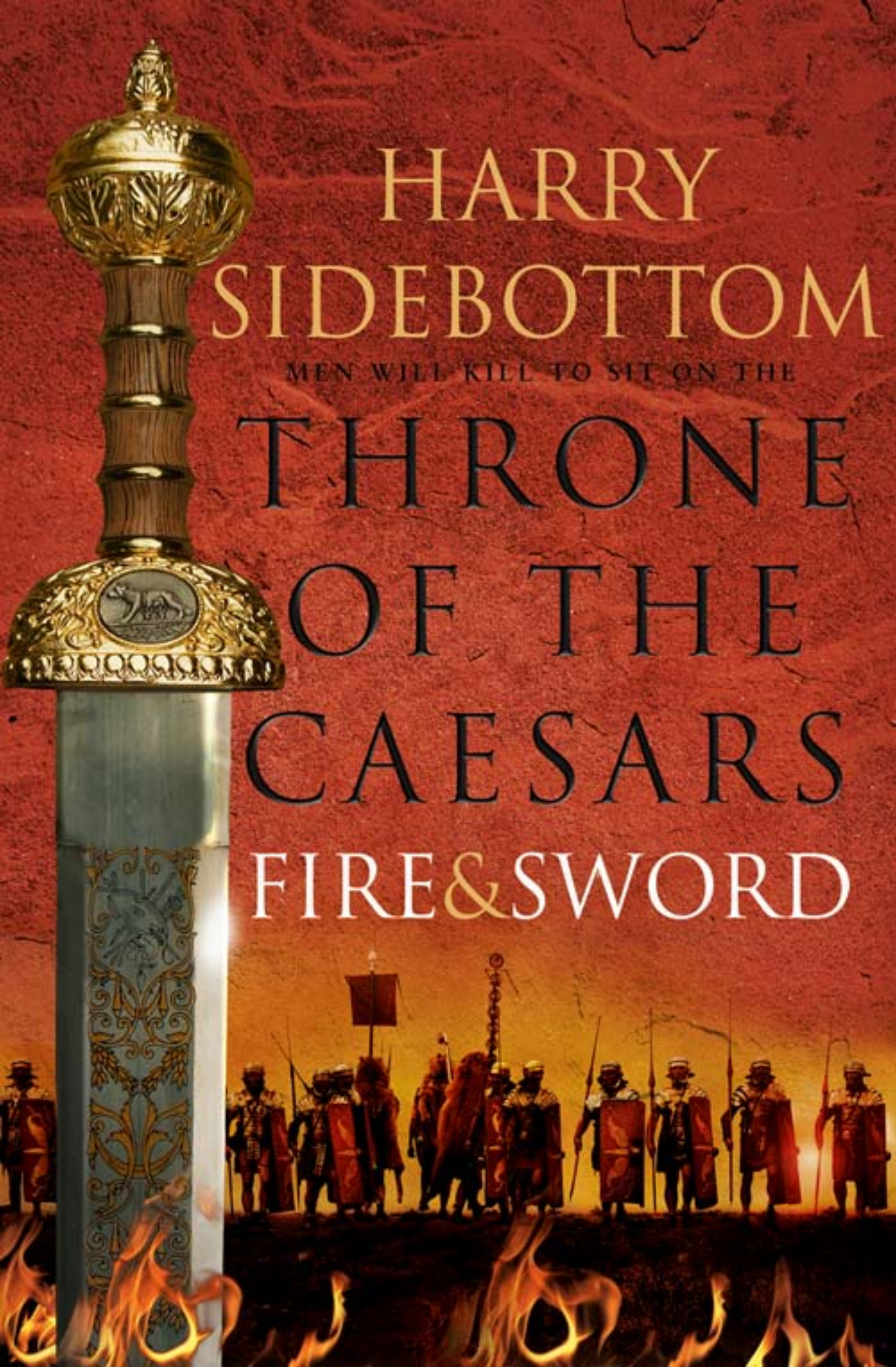
Fire & Sword

Written by Harry Sidebottom

Published by HarperCollins

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MEN WILL KILL TO SIT ON THE
THRONE
OF THE
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FIRE&SWORD

HARRY
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THRONE OF THE CAESARS

FIRE & SWORD



HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2016
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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–00–749992–2

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

Set in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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An empty pageant; a stage play; flocks of sheep, herds of cattle; a tussle of spearmen; a bone flung among a pack of curs; a crumb tossed into a pond of fish; ants, loaded and labouring; mice, scampering and scared; puppets jerking on their strings – that is life.

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* VII.3

PROLOGUE: AFRICA



Africa

The City of Carthage,
Eight Days before the Kalends of April, AD*238*

'Lay down your arms!'

As he spoke, Capelianus turned in the saddle, took in the enemy. On both flanks their levies were running, back under the aqueduct, pelting through the tombs towards the illusory safety of the walls of Carthage. His own auxiliaries, all discipline gone, were chasing them, hacking at their defenceless backs. Here in the centre, half of their regulars had put down their standards and weapons, and stretched out empty hands in supplication. Only a thousand still stood against him; the Urban Cohort, and the young men formed into the sham Praetorian Guard of the two usurpers. Win them over, disarm them, and victory was complete. Africa would be won back for Maximinus, the revolt of the Gordiani crushed. Not a battle, but a massacre.

'Lay down your arms, fellow-soldiers. Your fight is done and over.'

Frightened eyes stared at him over the wall of shields a few paces ahead. They were outnumbered two to one. These

locally raised Praetorians were not real soldiers. There was no sign of the younger Gordian.

'Your pretend Emperor has fled. Those who led you astray have fled. No mounted officers remain under your standards.'

Still the enemy did not move.

'Return to your military oath. You were misled. The clemency of your true Emperor Maximinus is boundless. I am merciful. There will be no retribution.'

A stirring in the ranks opposite. A tall, heavy man, pushing his way to the front. He was bareheaded.

Capelianus realized his mistake. His opponent had not fled.

Gordian the Younger stepped forth, like some terrible, martial epiphany.

The din of the killing was distant. Into the unnerving silence, here in the eye of the storm, Gordian shouted.

'We will stand together to the end!'

Gordian drew his sword, levelled the blade at the man who had come to kill him.

'The coward Capelianus has put himself at our mercy.'

Gordian was just a dozen paces away; big, powerful, clad in armour, exuding menace.

'Some god has blinded him. Kill the cuckold, and the day is yet ours. With me, brothers.'

Capelianus felt his limbs clumsy with fear. Only four ranks of legionaries between him and those terrible man-killing hands.

'Are you ready for war?' Gordian called, the words booming through the lines.

Ready! Caught up in the intoxicating ritual of blood, the enemy shouted as one.

Ready!

On the third response, they charged, heedless of the odds against them.

At a run, Gordian crashed, shield to shield, into the foremost

legionary. The man staggered back, fell to the ground, unbalancing those behind. Gordian was in their midst. Steel flashed in the sun. Men flailed and screamed. The tumult stunned the senses. Through it all, remorseless, heavy-shouldered, Gordian drove forward. An officer at his side cut down another legionary.

A mere three ranks shielded Capelianus. He felt his courage slipping away. Your heart shrank when you were past fifty, shrank until it was no bigger than that of a child.

Gordian chopped down a man to his right, took a blow, cut down the legionary in front.

Two ranks between Capelianus and Nemesis.

This was insane. Capelianus turned the head of his horse. The battlefield was his, except for here. No point in throwing his life away, not when victory was in his grasp. His cavalry had routed the opposing horse on the left. Only a handful of the enemy had broken through, and escaped to the south. Now his Numidian tribesmen were galloping wildly to the city in pursuit of plunder and rape, and the pleasures of killing the unresisting, but the regulars were rallying. Canter over there, watch from the safety of their formation, as the overwhelming numbers of his legionaries ground down Gordian and the last of the rebels.

As Capelianus hesitated, he saw Gordian take a blow to his unhelmeted head. Bloodied, but seemingly impervious, as if some deity inhabited him, Gordian thrust his blade through his assailant. Gods below, where had the degenerate acquired this energy? Was there no stopping him?

One rank remained. Prudence dictated withdrawal. Capelianus gathered his reins.

No. Everything hinged on this moment, this fleeting, unstable encounter between what had been and what would be. If they saw him flee, the morale of the legionaries would break. Panic would spread like wildfire through his whole

army. Gordian would be left with the last ordered infantry in the field. With that tiny, ragtag force, the unworthy sot of a pretender would have won the most improbable of victories, would have defeated the 3rd Legion Augusta, the only legion in Africa. Gordian would process into Carthage in triumph. They would throw flowers at his feet. Gordian and his odious father would continue to wear the purple.

Capelianus tugged his sword from its scabbard. The bone hilt was slippery in his palm, no comfort. He yelled at his men, his voice unsteady.

'Kill him! Cut him down!'

There was still some fight left in the legionaries. A slashing blade near severed the neck of the rebel officer next to Gordian. A spray of blood, bright in the sunshine. The officer vanished under the stamping boots of the melee. And suddenly Gordian was alone, ringed with steel.

'Kill him! Just one man, finish him!'

For a moment they hung back like dogs around a bear brought to bay in the arena.

Gordian shifted his sword and shield this way and that, covering himself, gathering his strength, searching for an opening, a way to Capelianus. Blood was running freely down Gordian's face, getting in his eyes.

'For the gods' sake, it is just one man. He is wounded. End him!' Capelianus was hollow with fear.

A movement behind Gordian. A legionary jabbed his sword hard between Gordian's shoulder blades. Gordian stumbled forward. Another swung at his head. Gordian brought up his splintered shield. Too slow. The sharp, heavy steel cut into his jaw, snapping his head sideways.

'Finish him!'

Gordian was on his knees. A blow to the back of his head dropped him to all fours, and then they were on him, like a pack of wild dogs breaking up their prey.

Capelianus howled in exultation. 'Cut him to pieces. Dismember the drunken bastard.'

Gordian was dead! So much for comparing himself to Hannibal, to Alexander. He was dead! The posturing fool was dead!

'Chop off his head. Trample his body.'

The unconsidered words were a spur to action. Yes, he would trample his enemy in the dirt. Vaunt over him like a hero of old, a hero from Homer. Capelianus sheathed his unused sword, went to climb off his horse.

A hand gripped his arm. Firmanus, the *Primus Pilus* of the 3rd Legion. How dare he put his hands on a superior officer? Capelianus would break him to the ranks, have the skin off his back. The old Centurion was saying something.

'Gordian the Elder.'

All the Furies, how had the senile goat slipped his mind? Capelianus had waited half a lifetime and more for his revenge. It would not escape him now.

Festina lente. Capelianus mastered himself. *Hurry slowly*. First the field must be secured. The revenge of the gods grinds slow but certain.

With the death of the younger Gordian, his remaining men had begun to surrender. Already the seasoned legionaries of the 3rd were surrounding them. Capelianus gave Firmanus his orders, his voice low and confidential.

'Disarm them. Separate the Praetorians from the men of the Urban Cohort. Execute all the former. Keep the latter for decimation. Have the four Cohorts who came over without fighting retake their oath to Maximinus. Keep your legionaries under the standards. They can join the looting tomorrow. They will have a donative to make good their losses.'

Firmanus saluted, and went off to enact the commands.

Capelianus was satisfied. The youths enlisted in the bogus Praetorians had instigated the revolt. It was right they should

pay the penalty. The regular soldiers of the Urban Cohort had done no worse than choose the wrong side. Decimation was enough. Discipline would be restored when one in ten had been beaten to death by his tent-mates. Old-fashioned Roman morality. The spectacle would be edifying. Maximinus would approve.

Off to the left, Capelianus' cavalrymen were rounding up their defeated opponents. The majority of these prisoners were civilians who had risen against their rightful Emperor. Implicated in treachery and sacrilege, they too must die. Their numbers demanded all of Capelianus' horsemen as a guard.

Capelianus regarded his staff: Sabinianus the traitor, two tribunes, and four troopers. In the distance the gates of Carthage were still clogged with the slaughter. Further organized resistance was improbable. Seven mounted men should ensure his safety. Now for Gordian the Father.

'With me.'

Capelianus set off towards the aqueduct and the city.

Gordian the Elder would not escape. For three decades Capelianus had nurtured his hatred. He had been a young Senator of promise, tipped for great things. Until his whore of a first wife had cuckolded him with Gordian. Against all justice, the priapic old man had been acquitted of adultery. In the Senate, among the imperial courtiers, Capelianus had become a figure of mockery. The inadequate who could not control or satisfy his wife. His career had stalled. Eventually he had mortgaged his estates to raise the money to buy the Consulship. Then he had re-mortgaged them to obtain the governorship of a province. Rather than Asia or Africa Proconsularis, wealthy provinces where he could have made good all the bribes and recouped his fortune, he had received Numidia. Flyblown deserts and barren mountains, intractable natives and savage tribes, scorching in summer and freezing in winter; a host of mundane duties, scarcely rewarded; an

office for junior Senators who would climb no higher. The bitterest draught was swallowed when old Gordian had been installed in Carthage: an aged Silenus lording it over the second city of the empire, reaping the riches of neighbouring Africa Proconsularis.

They rode under the aqueduct, and through the necropolis. Fresh corpses were strewn among the resting places of their forebears, like blood offerings in some barbaric religion. The small cavalcade passed a pretentious, half-finished tomb in white marble. Capelianus had given Carthage over to the soldiery. For three days they could do as they pleased. It gave Capelianus a grim satisfaction that the bereaved family might never again have the means to finish the tomb. If any lived to attempt the task.

The Hadrumetum Gate was blocked with the dead and dying. They reined in. Some auxiliaries were energetically stripping bodies. The corpses were pallid things, all humanity gone. Capelianus shouted at the soldiers to clear a path. Reluctantly they turned to the unwanted and unremunerative task, heaving and shoving as they handled the recalcitrant sides of meat.

'Faster, you dogs, unless you want to feel the lash.'

Gordian the Elder must not escape. Capelianus turned to Sabinianus.

'Will he try and get away by the harbour?'

Sabinianus took his time answering. 'I do not think so. They trusted to their numbers. There was no provision for flight. No ship was readied.'

Nothing appeared to ruffle the patrician assurance of Sabinianus. Late last night, he had crept out of the city, deserted the Gordiani. In the camp of Capelianus, to prove his change of heart, Sabinianus had cut a prisoner's throat. The prisoner had been his closest friend. It was said Sabinianus had loved Arrian like a brother.

No one could trust such a man. Sabinianus had revealed the ambush set by the Gordiani: the five hundred horsemen hidden among the warehouses and walls of the Fish Ponds beyond Capelianus' left wing, poised to take his army in the flank, to roll up the line. Without the intervention of Sabinianus the battle might have had a very different outcome. Capelianus looked at him with loathing and contempt. *Love the treachery, detest the traitor.*

'What will the old man do?'

'Make a stand in the palace.'

'A stand?' Capelianus failed to keep the anxiety out of his voice. 'They kept troops in reserve?'

'A handful.' Sabinianus smiled. 'Nothing to bother the conqueror of Carthage, the new Scipio.'

Capelianus had granted Sabinianus his life. Yet the decision could be revoked.

The way clear, they clattered into the town.

It was a vision of the underworld, Tartarus, where the wicked endure their eternal punishments. Bodies, slumped and naked. Old women and young children wailing. Smashed heirlooms, desecrated homes. A smell of spilt wine and burning, a reek of vomit and excrement.

They rode up the Street of Saturn, between the Temples of Venus and Salus. As if to mock the divine assurances of *Love* and *Safety*, a young matron ran pell-mell from an alley. Hot in pursuit, a dozen or so Numidians.

Despite himself, despite the urgency of his mission, Capelianus stopped to watch.

The Numidians caught her on the steps of the Temple of Salus. As they stripped her, there was something arousing about her sharp, desperate screams. Her body was very white, even her legs and arms; a well-brought-up young wife, sheltered from the sun, modest and chaste.

She lashed out, but they forced her down, bent her over

a low balustrade. Her buttocks were pale as marble, her sex dark and desirable. The heat of the climate inclined Numidians to rape, their loose, unbelted tunics facilitated the act. When their leader mounted her, she called some appeal to the men on horseback.

Capelianus smiled. 'Health and great joy to you.'

The men laughed.

This would not do. Capelianus had an infinitely more pressing desire. Not lust, but vengeance.

They entered the Forum, passed the white altar of Peace and the bronze tablets inscribed with the ancient laws of Rome. At the far end soldiers and tribesmen promiscuously went to and fro among the pillars of the governor's palace.

A Prefect, the commander of one of the auxiliary Cohorts, came down the steps.

'Gordian the Elder is in a small dining room, the one they call the Delphix.'

'Alive or dead?'

'Dead.'

Before dismounting, Capelianus addressed the Prefect. 'Your Cohort broke ranks, disobeyed orders, chased the rebels. After the three days of licence, there will be punishments.'

The officer saluted. 'We will do what is ordered, and at every command we will be ready.'

The chastened Prefect led them into the corridors of the palace. From deeper in the labyrinth, muffled by inlaid doors and heavy curtains, came the sounds of bestial revelry. Capelianus half-remembered a passage of Polybius from his schooldays. The Greek historian had been much impressed by the order with which the Romans sacked a town. No soldier turned to looting until he was given the command. All the plunder was heaped in one place to be distributed according to rank and merit. No man kept anything back for himself. But that was long ago. Things were different now.

Discipline and virtue were only words. The way of the ancestors, the *mos maiorum*, all forgotten, no more than an expression.

In the Delphix a semi-circle of troops stood like a tragic chorus around the hanged man. An overturned chair and a pool of liquid beneath the dangling feet of the corpse. The front of Gordian's tunic was wet. It was said a hanged man ejaculated. By the smell, it was just urine.

Capelianus studied the bulging eyes and protruding tongue. A coward's death. Not the steel, but the rope. A woman's way of suicide. The dissatisfaction habitual to Capelianus consumed his thoughts. There had been a prophecy that the Gordiani would die by drowning. Capelianus had looked forward to making that come true. A butt of wine would have been fitting. Father and son had both cheated him.

'We have captured one of their friends.' The young Prefect was eager to make amends.

The man was pushed forward. He was battered, his clothes torn, his arms and legs laden with chains.

'Name? Race? Free or slave?' Capelianus intoned the traditional beginning to an inquisition.

The prisoner did not answer. He was staring at Sabinianus.

'Name?'

Now the man gave his attention to Capelianus.

'Mauricius, son of Mauricius, town councillor of Thysdrus and Hadrumetum.'

Capelianus knew of him. 'The catalyst of this evil revolt. An arch-conspirator.'

Mauricius drew himself up in his chains. 'Friend of the late Emperors, Prefect of the Horse Guards of Marcus Antonius Gordianus Romanus Africanus Augustus, Father and Son.'

'A traitor.'

'No traitor, but a true friend.' Mauricius looked again at

Sabinianus, with hatred. 'A friend loyal to death. We should have known from the start. The signs were there. We should have listened at Ad Palmam when you said you would sacrifice anyone for your safety.'

No emotion showed on the face of Sabinianus.

'Coward! Oath-breaker with the heart of a deer!'

'You realize you will die.' Capelianus cut off the imprecations.

'What is terrible is easy to endure.' There was a smile on the face of Mauricius, its reason unknowable.

'You will be tortured.'

'You cannot hurt me.'

'The claws will tear your flesh.'

'They cannot touch my soul.'

A local festival, the Mamuralia, occurred to Capelianus. 'You will be whipped through the streets of Carthage. Outside the Hadrumetum Gate, by the Mappalian Way, you will be crucified.'

'I am a citizen of Rome.' There was outrage in Mauricius' tone, yet somehow his self-possession held.

'No, you are an enemy of Rome. As a *hostis*, you will die. Take him away.'

Mauricius did not struggle, but he shouted as they dragged him from the room. 'Death to the tyrant Maximinus! Death to his creatures! You are cursed! The Furies will turn your future to ashes and suffering!'

Capelianus turned to the Prefect. 'What of the others close to the pretenders?'

'All of rank dead on the battlefield, apart from Aemilius Severinus, the one they call Phillyrio. He was ordered south some days ago to gather the Frontier Scouts. Together with those *speculatores*, he was to rally the barbarians beyond the frontier.'

'We will hunt him down. We will hunt down all their

followers, high and low.' Capelianus felt a stab of pleasure. He had always loved the chase; men or beasts, it made no difference.

'Some of their household – Valens, the *A Cubiculo*, and some other freedmen and slaves – escaped. They had a fast ship waiting by the mole of the outer harbour.'

Capelianus rounded on Sabinianus. 'You told me they had no ship ready.'

Sabinianus said nothing.

'You brought us here. Were you trying to let him escape?'

'No.' Sabinianus' downturned mouth twitched slightly. 'Last night I gave proof of my change of heart.'

Had the tiny involuntary grimace betrayed the patrician? Capelianus could not be sure. Sabinianus the traitor needed watching, but for now Capelianus put him out of his mind.

The corpse was still there.

'Get him down.'

The soldiers bustled about the task, teetering on chairs, holding the legs of the corpse.

Capelianus wondered what could have induced his old enemy and his wastrel son to have bid for the throne. Certainly not justice or duty. They were archaic concepts, suitable back in the days of the free *Res Publica*, but outmoded and unfitting in the debased age of the Caesars. Capelianus knew what motivated men under autocracy. Nothing but lust and greed. The latter was far the stronger; greed for power as well as for wealth. At his advanced age perhaps the father had considered there was little to lose, that it would be no small thing to die clad in the purple. As for the son, his thoughts had been addled by wine and debauchery, his reasoning unsound. Yet even so, they must have appreciated in moments of clarity that they would fail. No legion was stationed in the province of Africa Proconsularis. The secret had long been revealed that Emperors could be made

outside Rome. But never without the backing of thousands of legionaries.

The corpse was down.

'Cut off his head. It will go to Maximinus.'

A soldier set about the butchery.

But would the head reach Maximinus? Against all likelihood, the Senate in Rome had declared for the Gordiani. Italy had gone over to the rebels. The fleets at Misenum and Ravenna controlled its ports. The head would have to travel up the other shore of the Adriatic, go ashore in Dalmatia, then journey overland to seek out Maximinus on the Danube frontier.

Decapitation was never easy. Sawing away, the soldier was slipping in a welter of blood.

And what remained for the Senate now? Traitors to a man. Maximinus was born a Thracian, brought up as a common soldier. Forgiveness was not a virtue cultivated by either group. The Senate could expect no mercy. Executions and confiscations, a holocaust. Few would survive. Great houses would be extinguished. The proscriptions of Sulla or Severus would be as nothing.

The head was off. Blood pooled across the marble floor, soaked into the fine rugs.

'Preserve it in a jar of honey. Maximinus will want to gaze on his face.'

The Senate could expect no mercy. All its accumulation of experience and expertise in subtle negotiation would do no good. The Senate would have to acclaim another Emperor. Thessalian persuasion; necessity disguised as choice. But who would it clothe in the purple? Surely a governor with troops at his disposal. Maximinus was with the Danubian army. Decius in Spain was his dedicated supporter. So would the Senate turn to a governor on the Rhine or one in Britain? Or would it send a laurelled despatch to one of the great commanders in the East? Or possibly, just possibly, might its

gaze focus nearer to hand? To a man proven in the field, a man who had overthrown Emperors, a man who held all Africa in his hand?

'Throw the rest of him out into the Forum for the dogs.'

Some considered ambition was a vice, others held it a virtue. Capelianus inclined to the latter view. Yet to be Emperor was to hold a wolf by the ears. Better by far to be the man who stood behind the throne of the Caesars. Capelianus looked over at Sabinianus. Traitors had their uses.

PART I:
ITALY

CHAPTER 1



Rome

The Temple of Concordia Augusta,
Six Days before the Kalends of April, AD*238*

'Dead? Both of them? Are you certain?'

Standing before the Senate of Rome, the old freedman was unabashed by the Consul's brusque questions.

'Gordian the Younger died on the field of battle. When Gordian the Elder ordered me to convey what remained of his household to safety, his mind was set on suicide.'

Licinius Rufinus leant forward on the Consular tribunal. 'Was his bodyguard with him?'

'He was alone.'

'You did not see him take his life?'

This was pointless. Pupienus sat back, let his gaze shift around the huge interior of the temple, run over the myriad sculptures and paintings, part obscured by the gloom. Valens had been *A Cubiculo* to Gordian the Elder forever, since before the flood. He had served well when his master was alive, and would do the same now his master was dead. There was no doubting his evidence. The Emperors that the Senate had

acclaimed were dead. No amount of juristic interrogation could bring them back.

Opposite Pupienus a painting by Zeuxis hung over the heads of the Senators. Marsyas was bound to the tree hand and foot, naked, already twisted in agony. At his feet the Scythian slave was sharpening the knife, looking up at the man whose skin he would peel from his living body. With the Gordiani dead, every Senator in the temple could expect some similar fate when Maximinus came down from the North and took Rome. Maximinus was a Thracian, a barbarian. They were no different from Scythians; strangers to reason and pity. Clemency was not in their nature.

Valens was dismissed, and walked out. Pupienus envied the aged ex-slave. The very obscurity of his station might prove his salvation. There was no such hope for himself. No hope at all for the man appointed Prefect of the City to oversee Rome in the name of the Gordiani. None whatsoever for the man complicit in the killing of his predecessor, Sabinus, Maximinus' appointee. Too late for a change of heart, and compromise was not an option. Some other, desperate course must be taken.

As presiding magistrate Licinius called on the Conscript Fathers to give their advice.

In the nervous silence, Pupienus turned the ring on the middle finger of his right hand, the ring containing the poison.

To the relief of all, Gallicanus sought permission to address the meeting.

Pupienus regarded the speaker with disfavour. A tangle of unwashed hair and beard, a homespun toga, no tunic, bare feet; an ostentatious parade of self-proclaimed antique virtue. All it needed was a staff and a wallet for alms, and he would have been Diogenes reborn. Pupienus thought Cynic philosophers were meant to abstain from politics; certainly they should not possess the property qualification of a Senator. He trusted his distaste did not show on his face.

‘A tyrant is descending upon us. A monster stained with innocent blood. Conscript Fathers, we must recover our ancestral courage.’

All true enough, although Pupienus considered that more than rhetoric was needed. Specific proposals were required at this desperate pass. The Senate hated Maximinus for killing their friends and relatives, for the continual exactions to pay for the unwinnable northern wars. They loathed him for the lack of respect shown to their order. Since his elevation, he had never set foot in the Curia, or even visited Rome. Ultimately they despised him for not being one of them. When news came of the revolt of the Gordiani in Africa, it had seemed a gods-given salvation. The Senate had voted them the purple, had denied Maximinus and his son fire and water, had declared them enemies of Rome. The Senate had acted hastily. It had gambled, and it had lost. There was nothing for it now but to gamble again. One last throw of the dice: elect a new Emperor.

‘A ravening tyrant is coming from the savage North. We must defend our families, our homes, the temples of our gods. We must stand in the ranks ourselves. To elect another tyrant in the hope that he will defend us from the one already approaching is insanity.’

The words irritated Pupienus. No candidate had yet been nominated. It was too early for personal invective. Unless . . . surely Gallicanus was not going to propose the mad scheme he had aired in Pupienus’ house three years earlier, when the news had come that the Emperor Alexander had been murdered?

‘Place a man above the laws, and he will become lawless. Power corrupts. Even should a man be found with the virtue to resist temptation, a man who would rule for others not himself, history has shown that the heirs to his position will be tyrants, ruling for their own perverse pleasure.’

The small philosophic coterie led by Gallicanus' especial friend Maecenas shook back the threadbare folds of their togas and applauded. The majority of the Senators, all better apparelled, sat in silence.

'I am not suggesting anything new, anything foreign. The gods forbid we should institute a radical democracy. The Athenian past demonstrates how quickly such a constitution slides into mob rule. I do not even propose we Senators take power, rule as an aristocracy. Every such state inevitably has been deformed into an oligarchy, where a few rich men trample down their fellow citizens. No, I argue we should return to our ancestral government. Rome became great under a free Republic. Every order of men knew their duties and their place. The Consuls embodied the monarchic element, the Senate the aristocratic, the assemblies of the people the democratic. All was balanced in harmony. As a Republic, Rome defeated Hannibal. As a Republic, Rome will defeat Maximinus. We have already elected a board of twenty men to prosecute the war. We have no need of an Emperor, no need to set the boots of an autocrat over our heads. Conscript Fathers, we need do nothing to restore the Republic. The providence of the gods who watch over Rome has made the Republic live again. Let us seize our liberty! Let *libertas* be our watchword!'

Gallicanus, archaic probity personified, glared defiance at the unmoved togate benches. Maecenas came forward, and put his arm around the shoulders of his *amicus*, said something soft in his ear. Gallicanus smiled, no longer a barking Cynic dog, but, despite his more than forty years, an unsure youth seeking approbation.

Pupienus was mildly surprised when Fulvius Pius took the floor. Inoffensiveness, not ability, had seen Pius rise to the Consulship then the Board of Twenty. His career had been marked by neither independence of thought or action, nor much display of courage.

'Fine words for a lesson in philosophy, fine words to address two or three pupils. Utterly inappropriate to this august house.'

Since his election to the Twenty, not only had a certain initiative surfaced in Pius, but an unexpected asperity.

'I will not enter into a philosophical dialogue with Gallicanus. This is not the time or place to debate the tenets of the schools. Instead we should face realities. No one regrets the passing of the free Republic more keenly than me. The busts of Cato, Brutus and Cassius have pride of place in my house. But the free Republic is nothing more than a pleasant memory. If we could not see that for ourselves, long ago the historian Tacitus taught us that the rule of an Emperor and the continuance of our empire are inextricably linked.'

Still locked in an embrace, Gallicanus and Maecenas glowered at the speaker.

'Only a handful of men, beguiled by the high-sounding words of philosophy, want the return of the long dead Republic. The majority of all orders desire the status quo. The provincials can appeal to the Emperor against unjust decisions of their governors. The *plebs urbana* look to the Emperor to give them the sustenance of life, and the spectacles that make it worth living. The soldiers receive their pay from the Emperor, and give him their oath. What of the Praetorians? Their sole reason for existence is to guard the Emperor. And what of us, Conscript Fathers? With no Emperor to restrain them, the ambitions of certain Senators would again tear the Republic apart. A welter of civil strife would consume our armies. The barbarians would pour over the frontiers, sack our cities, drown our dominion in blood.'

'Not if we return to the ways of our ancestors,' Gallicanus shouted.

Pius smiled, as if patiently correcting a schoolboy. 'The *mos maiorum* was no defence against Caesar or Augustus. We do

not live in Plato's Republic. Let us face facts as statesmen. We must have an Emperor to lead our defence. The fate of the Gordiani shows that the man elected must command legions. As the armies in the North are with Maximinus, let us send the purple to a governor of one of the great provinces in the East, begging him to march with all haste to save Rome.'

Gallicanus bellowed defiance. 'Cowardice! The gods may never grant us another opportunity for *libertas*!'

Amidst an outcry of disapproval – *Sit down! Leave the floor!* – Maecenas pulled his friend back to his seat.

'Conscript Fathers.' Licinius struggled to be heard over the clamour. 'Senators of Rome!'

Eventually the house heeded the Consul.

'Conscript Fathers, the distinguished Consular Fulvius Pius has given us good advice. In all but one respect. The very practicalities he urges mitigate against the election of an eastern governor. Their allegiance is unknown. Indeed the governor of Cappadocia, Catius Clemens, was one of the men who put Maximinus on the throne.'

Pupienus was not alone in looking at Clemens' younger brother. Catius Celer sat modestly a few rows back, among the ex-Praetors and other Senators who had not yet been Consul. His face betrayed nothing. He had been quick to acknowledge the Gordiani. Many great houses had the foresight to survive times of troubles by having relatives on both sides.

'That aside, there are factors of distance and time. With favourable winds, a despatch might reach Syria in days, but by land or sea an army could not return for months. Maximinus will be upon us long before. We must acclaim one of our own. The Senate already has elected the Board of Twenty to defend the *Res Publica*. The choice should be made from among their number.'

A low murmur of speculation filled the temple.

Licinius continued. 'A decision of this importance is not to

be taken on a whim. I propose to adjourn the house, to allow time for careful consideration, to seek to discern the will of the gods, and to allow us to mourn the Gordiani with due piety. The Senate will reconvene on a propitious day, when the auguries are good. Conscript Fathers, we detain you no longer.'

The doors of the temple were opened. Light filled the *cella*, banishing the dark to rafters, corners, and seldom-frequented spaces behind the statuary.

Pupienus wholeheartedly believed in the traditions of the Senate, but he needed to be alone. He told his sons to accompany the presiding Consul home as his representatives, and requested his close friends to join him later for dinner.

It took time for the near four hundred Senators in attendance to make their way out into the sunshine. Some lingered, talking in little groups, covertly eyeing the members of high standing and influence. Intrigue and ambition, two things at the heart of their order, had, at least for the moment, driven out fear. Many looked at Pupienus as he sat unmoving and alone.

Pupienus regarded Marsyas: naked, racked, ribs lifted high, skin stretched, taut and vulnerable. No escape from the knife. Marsyas had challenged Apollo. It had been his downfall, brought him to his hideous end. Marsyas was not the only one destroyed by ambition. Some philosophers castigated *ambitio* as a vice, others held it a virtue. Perhaps it was composed of both qualities. Pupienus was ambitious. He had risen high. Yet was the ultimate ambition – the throne itself – too dangerous for a man whose life was predicated on a lie? Pupienus knew that if the secret that he had guarded all his life were revealed his many achievements would be as nothing, and he would be ruined and broken.

The temple was almost empty, just a few attendants clearing away the paraphernalia of the meeting. Pupienus'

secretary, Fortunatianus, was waiting on the threshold. Pupienus beckoned him.

Fortunatianus knew his master. Without words, he handed Pupienus the writing block and stylus.

Pupienus opened the hinged wooden blocks, regarded the smooth wax. His mind worked best with something on which to focus, some visual mnemonic. There were only nine of the Board of Twenty in Rome. On receipt of the news would ambition drive others to desert their posts and rush to the city? What of Menophilus at Aquileia, or Rufinianus in the Apennines? Best leave them aside, deal with such circumstances if they arose. For now there were only nine men eligible for election in Rome, only nine men in this strange situation thought capable of empire. He ordered them, and wrote a list, annotated only in his thoughts.

Capax imperii

Allies

Pupienus – Prefect of the City, experienced and resourceful, accustomed to command, yet a novus homo, standing on the edge of a precipice

Tineius Sacerdos – a respectable nobleman, father of the wife of Pupienus' elder son, loyal, but lacking dynamism

Praetextatus – another nobilis, ill-favoured father of the ill-favoured new bride of Pupienus' younger son, a more recent friend of unproven fidelity, apparently without competence

Opponents

Gallicanus – a violent, hirsute, yapping Cynic

Maecenas – his intimate, somewhat better groomed, yet still rendered intransigent by philosophic pretentions to virtue

Others

Licinius – a Greek novus homo, once an imperial secretary, intelligent and enterprising

Fulvius Pius – another nobilis, formerly of little account, now growing in stature

Valerian – confidant of the dead Gordiani, not altogether without merit, a follower not a leader

Balbinus – repellent mixture of complacency and cupidity, like the majority of the patricians

Three, including himself, who could be expected to favour the candidature of Pupienus. It could be assumed that Gallicanus and Maecenas, beguiled by dreams of a dead Republic, would oppose any aspirant to sole power. Pupienus needed to win over two of the remaining four. Yet it was not just the men themselves. Everything depended on the votes they could bring. The issue would be decided by decree of the whole Senate.

Which two must he attempt to bring over?

Much would tell against Licinius among traditional Senators: his Hellenic origins – *Greeks were naturally untrustworthy* – his early employment – *a secretary at another's beck and call* – even his intelligence – *Greeks were far too clever for their own good, and always, always talking*.

Fulvius Pius had a long career behind him, and was distantly related to the Emperor Septimius Severus. Familial ties and propinquities of office might sway a few to his side in the house, but nowhere near enough.

Valerian had been at the heart of the brief, doomed regime of the Gordiani. The death of the principals would have robbed their faction of appeal to the majority of Senators. Yet there were issues to weigh beyond the Curia. Pupienus himself commanded the six thousand soldiers of the Urban Cohorts. All the other military forces near at hand – the thousand Praetorians and seven thousand men of the *vigiles* in Rome,

and the thousand swords of the 2nd Legion in the Alban Hills – were led by equestrian officers, every one of whom was bound by the ties of patronage to the *Domus Rostrata*, the noble house of the Gordiani. If Valerian was in his camp, Pupienus could put a noose of steel around the Senate House.

And then there was Balbinus. A porcine face on a corpulent body, both bloated by a lifetime of indulgence and perversity. A soul where stupidity vied with low cunning, and profound indolence with vast ambition. It was impossible to measure how much Pupienus despised the man. Yet Balbinus was a kinsman of the divine Emperors Trajan and Hadrian, a member of the Coelli, a clan that went back to the foundation of the free Republic, and, by their own account, beyond history itself, all the long way to Aeneas and the gods. Irrespective of his character, centuries of familial wealth and public honours, an atrium filled with smoke-blackened portrait busts, endowed Balbinus with a status that could command the votes of many Senators.

In politics often emotion must be set aside. Pupienus would have to stomach the patrician's sneers and jibes. *Rome is less your lodging house than your stepmother. Beguile us with your ancestry; tell us the great deeds of your father.* But what bait could Pupienus dangle before those slobbering jaws, what prize so glittering that it could pierce Balbinus' lethargy, and induce him to prevail on his relatives, friends and clients in the Curia to vote imperial honours to a man he regarded as an upstart, little better than a slave?

The honours of an Emperor. Pupienus reviewed the purple, the ivory throne, the sacred fire. In a private enterprise one could press on or draw back, commit oneself more deeply or less. But in the pursuit of an empire there was no mean between the summit and the abyss. To be Emperor was to live on the stage of a public theatre, every movement and word visible. There was no mask. One's inner being and past were

stripped bare. Certainly too close a scrutiny for a man with a secret lodged less than two hundred miles from Rome. If he were to proceed, Pupienus would have to go one last time to Volaterrae, and bury his past. It was a task he had prayed never to have to undertake. Everything decent cried out against it. But to bid for the throne all emotion must be set aside.