

As the story opens, Aemilianus, a provincial governor, has revolted and is marching with his legions toward Rome, an all-too-frequent scenario during Imperial Rome's existence. He intends to defeat and kill Gallus, the current emperor, and take the title of emperor for himself. Gallus sends an urgent message to Valerian directing him to gather an army from several northern provinces, march to Rome, and assist Gallus defending against Aemilianus. But Aemilianus reaches Rome before Valerian, who must now make a serious decision.

"Emperor Gallus is dead." Valerian paused, anticipating some reaction from the two men sitting in front of him but got none. "He was killed by his Praetorian Guards after he was defeated in battle. No doubt the murderers hoped to win favor from Aemilianus."

"Killed by men sworn to protect him," Aurelian murmured, shaking his head.

"I wanted to tell you before word got out to the rest of the camp."

Claudius squirmed in his seat, reminded of his participation in a previous rebellion. Both Claudius and Aurelian commanded legions under Valerian's command. "What about Gallus' army?" he asked.

"They've joined Aemilianus. He offered forgiveness and a large sum of money to any man who joined him."

"I got that same offer when Decius succeeded Philip," Claudius replied, cheered by the memory. "The money was equivalent to several months' pay."

"Has the Senate declared Aemilianus emperor?" Aurelian asked.

Valerian shrugged. "What choice would they have?" he asked, sympathetic to the senators' position. A few years earlier, he had led the Senate himself. "Aemilianus has two armies supporting him now—Gallus' Praetorians and his own legionaries—and they could be in Rome in a few days."

"You probably have the larger army. What will you do?" Claudius asked.

Valerian's answer would determine whether there would be a civil war or a transition of power without bloodshed.

Valerian rubbed his chin and glanced around the campsite, taking in sights, sounds, and activities so familiar to him that only their absence would attract his attention. He breathed deeply, noticing the scent of animals intermixing with the smell of smoke from cooking fires. When he exhaled, he turned and faced Claudius. "Aemilianus will consider me his enemy whether I offer to join him or not. Either way he'll probably have me killed." Valerian hesitated. "I expect my troops will proclaim me emperor—"

"Which they'll undoubtedly do as soon as they hear about Gallus," Aurelian agreed.

"And if I refuse their proclamation, they'll probably kill me and join forces with Aemilianus." Valerian realized that senators were not the only ones in a predicament. "I have no choice but to challenge Aemilianus." Valerian paused and shuffled through the pile of parchments on his table before selecting one. "I've just put my official seal on this document promoting both of you to the rank of general, effective tonight. Since we'll be confronting Aemilianus now, I'll need generals, not just legates."

Both men glanced at each other. Claudius broke into a broad grin. “An unexpected honor, sir!”

A trace of a smile crept across Aurelian’s normally austere face. “What do you want us to do?”

“Help me defeat Aemilianus. Beyond that, I haven’t had time to give the matter much thought.” Before either Aurelian or Claudius could comment, Valerian dismissed them with a wave of his hand, his mind already on another issue. He signaled for his tribune. “Send the messenger back to me.”

“Where was I?” Valerian asked the messenger when they were alone.

“You said to take the western road.”

“Oh, yes.” Valerian scratched his head. “If you travel as an official messenger, I think you can reach Rome in just over a week. I’ll have my scribes draw up something with my seal on it for you to carry. A message from a governor to the emperor shouldn’t draw suspicion from anyone, and you’ll have access to fresh horses all along the route.”

The man smiled at the deception. “And the message for Gallienus?”

“Tell him I’m opposing Aemilianus’ claim to the title of emperor. Since Gallienus is serving as a city magistrate this year, he’ll be known to the city prefect, of course, and thus to Aemilianus.”

“I don’t know your son by sight. How will I find him?”

“His home is on Caelian Hill. Take Vicus Capisis Africus Road and go past Divus Claudius Temple. He’s near the peak—”

“I know the area.”

Valerian paused. “He ... sometimes frequents taverns and brothels in the Suburra at night. If you can’t find him at his home, look there. Disguise yourself as a merchant when you get into Rome. The city will be filled with Aemilianus’ spies and informers.”

While Valerian spoke with his messenger, Claudius and Aurelian walked toward their own quarters, relieved to be free of the stuffy confines of Valerian’s tent. “I remember entering the army as a raw recruit ... almost twenty years ago,” Claudius mused. “Remember when we shared the same tent during those first few years?”

“And fought beside each other on the front lines. You dragged me to safety when I was wounded fighting the Dacians with Emperor Maximinus.”

“And you kept that big Goth from spearing me after I’d been knocked to the ground and had my shield stripped away.”

Claudius smiled at the memory. He turned and grabbed Aurelian by the shoulders. “We’ve both risen from lowest-ranking legionaries to generals in the greatest army in the world! We’ve come from families without wealth or patronage and had to fight our way to the top without getting killed in the process. I never dreamed I’d reach this position!”

“Nor did I,” Aurelian agreed but turned his thoughts back to their present situation. “Now we’ll have to prove ourselves when we fight Aemilianus.”

Claudius frowned and lowered his voice, so two passing centurions wouldn’t hear him. “Have you ever fought in a civil war?”

“No.” Aurelian shook his head. They both looked behind them to ensure no one was within earshot. Satisfied, they resumed walking.

“I have,” Claudius said. “Not only will we be using the same tactics and maneuvers; we’ll probably know some of the people we’re being asked to kill.”

“If we lose, we’ll be executed right after Valerian.”

Claudius shrugged. "Then we'd better not lose."

"Do you think it's just a coincidence that we arrived a few days after Gallus was defeated?"

"What do you mean?"

"Valerian could have been taking his time gathering a big army to help Gallus. If he came before Aemilianus, he could help Gallus defend his title. If he came too late to save Gallus, he could defeat Aemilianus and claim the title for himself.

Claudius considered the possibility. "I thought he was moving slowly to rest the men for the coming conflict, but maybe Valerian had more than that in mind."

As they walked silently, Aurelian thought about Gallus' murder by his personal bodyguard and Valerian's slow march. When they reached Aurelian's tent, they stopped. "You know, as we rise in rank, there's less danger of harm from our enemies and more danger of betrayal by our 'friends.'"

Claudius grinned and slapped Aurelian on the back. "It's still better than tending sheep on a god-forsaken hillside in Illyria."