

Callistus, a senior general under Valerian's command, stood on the ramparts of Edessa trying to count the Persian campfires flickering beyond the city. He gave up when he couldn't determine where fires ended and stars began. The night was cold, clear, and still. He pulled his cloak closer around his shoulders.

"Would you like another, sir?" his aide asked, starting to remove his own.

Callistus held up a hand and shook his head, grateful for the offer. "You need it more than I do."

"What does it mean?" the aide asked, pointing at the host of campfires.

Callistus looked at his young aide for a moment. He was barely twenty, with no battle experience beyond this siege. "It means Shapur will launch a major assault on the city tomorrow."

"What do you think will happen?" the aide asked, expecting some reassurance from his general.

Callistus' reply was noncommittal. "We've held them off so far."

"Maybe the emperor will arrive with his reinforcements," the aide suggested.

Callistus nodded. "Maybe. Get some rest," he said, dismissing the aide. "We'll be up before dawn."

Callistus stared at the campfires long after the aide had gone. His men were weakened from days of half-rations. They would not have the strength to resist an all-out attack. *Without Valerian's relief column*, Callistus thought dispassionately, *it will probably be over in a day, two at the most*. He had faced the prospect of death many times in his career. Most were in the desperate moments of battle—an arrow splitting the top of his shield, a Persian lance penetrating part of his body armor, a last-second glimpse of a sword swung at his head. Better not to know that certain death lies just a day or two away. Callistus thought of his wife and family. *Had they known their fates in advance? Or had death come quickly, after Shapur overran their city, could it have been eighteen years ago?* His thoughts drifted to the emperor. Callistus held out little hope of relief, since Valerian had not come by now. He didn't know if the emperor had lost his nerve, changed his mind about relieving the city, or was just moving too slowly. In a few more days, the answer would not matter. When Valerian arrived, if he came at all, he would find a sacked city, defenders dead to the last man. Callistus stretched and sighed. He desperately needed a few hours' sleep.