

The stars had long since turned their course in the late-autumn night's sky, and dawn itself would not be long in breaking; yet the massive camp on the Hunnish plain was lit as in broad daylight, with such quantities of torches and bonfires as would have done credit even to Constantinople. The brightness of the city-camp was matched by the noisomeness of its inhabitants, for every man, woman, and child, every dog, housebound fowl, and domesticated plains pony, every slave and master, every Hun and exiled Goth and German, were lifting their voices and spirits in celebration. Their songs resonated across the plain, and the dung fires reflected red off the low-hanging smoke, creating a hazy glow that could be seen for miles across the expanse of waving, summer-dry grass.

A party of mounted Hunnish officers, thirty in all, thundered in from the plain, past the grinning Goth sentries who raised half-depleted skins of *kamon*, their foul barley beverage, in mocking salute to the dusty riders. They pounded through the dirt-packed streets, scarcely deigning to look down from their foaming mounts, for their fierce expressions and hurried pace were sufficient warning for bystanders to clear the way. From all sides, drunken faces leered at them in the flickering light. Horns, whistles, and wordless shouts greeted the riders' arrival, and hands grasped at their soft, doe-skin boots, welcoming them to the festivities or pushing against them in the jostling. The horsemen's leader looked about in distaste, not at the poverty and filth the city exuded, but at the signs of wealth: the dandified young men meandering drunkenly, fingers burdened with rings and shoulders heavy with the fine silken fabrics by which they aped the fashions of those they conquered; the thin-shanked European and Arabian horses the Goth officers rode, rather than the homely yet reliable steppe ponies the Huns had bred for generations; the chalices of metal from which many of the celebrants guzzled imported wine, rather than the wooden bowls from which the elders sipped humble *airag*, the Huns' traditional beverage of fermented mares' milk. The leader frowned in disapproval. It was a culture gone soft, a people who valued shiny baubles over sturdy horses, drunkenness over conquest, Gothic frivolities over Hunnish austerity. Attila, he reflected, had made himself conqueror of Asia and sovereign of the scattered Hunnish clans, and of many unruly European tribes as well; but the price he had paid for this unity of purpose, this assimilation, was perhaps one the mighty king had not anticipated.

The group of riders forced their way through the throng to the wood-palisade gates of the palace. There, the sentries were Hunnish, of more reliable and sober countenance; they glanced at the riders' impassive faces, ordered them to halt, and dispatched a runner to the inner compound.

The horsemen slumped into the relaxed position they adopted when dozing on their mounts. Despite their seeming ease, however, their eyes remained wary, peering out from beneath the low-wrought rims of their battered iron helmets. Their leader, a middle-aged Hun of broad shoulders and uncommon height and physical strength for his race, slid off his panting horse, landing with catlike grace and unstrapping his helmet before even touching the ground. Without setting aside his quiver and war bow, he shifted impatiently on his heels, peering past the palace guards into the flickering shadows, where snoring bodies littered the courtyard and doorways like so many casualties of a battle.

Across the courtyard, a heavy-set Germanic officer, armor glowing dully in the torchlight, emerged from the wooden palace doors and swaggered toward them. He shouldered through the drunken revelers, shaking his mane of reddish hair back over his shoulders, jutting his chin to expose a thick, dun-colored beard streaked with gray. He held a shining chalice in his right hand, but showed no intoxication or joyfulness. Indeed, his piercing blue-gray eyes were as alert and malicious as the last time the Hun had seen them six months before. He strode up to the horsemen and stopped in silence.

“What is happening here?” the Hunnish squad-leader demanded abruptly.

The German stared contemptuously at the new arrivals, then nodded to the sentries at the gate, who relaxed their guard. As the Hunnish horsemen slid off their mounts, he turned pointedly back toward their leader.

“Good to see you, too, Edeco,” he replied in flawless Hunnish. “This is how you greet me after six months away from camp?”

Edeco grunted in annoyance.

“I owe you no protocol, Orestes. Six months in Constantinople has made me sick of it. Unless your existence has more purpose than I remember, step aside. I must report to Attila.”

“The King is celebrating his wedding. He will take no reports now. Did you not see the revelry? Or are you as drunk as the rest of the camp?”

“His wedding? He has contracted a new wife?”

“A princess of a Pannonian tribe,” Orestes replied laconically. “Her father reigns over some river mud on the Danuvius. The wench will keep Attila warm for the next few nights.”

Edeco glanced at him coldly as the two men began picking their way across the dirt courtyard toward the palace.

“A Pannonian,” he scoffed. “No doubt loyal to Rome. And I see you yourself still wear a Roman citizenship ring, though you claim to serve Attila. You’re Germanic, she’s Germanic—I’m sure the arrangement held no conflict of interest.”

“My father was made a Roman citizen years ago, and I am proud to wear his ring.”

“Proud to wear Rome’s ring?” The Hun’s laugh was short and dry. “I once put a gold collar on a mongrel dog, which much improved its looks. But it was still just a mongrel.”

Orestes stopped short.

“What are you saying, Hun? Germans are not dogs.”

Edeco maintained his calm stride.

“So much the better for dogs.”

“Hunnish scum...”

Edeco whirled on him.

“You are Attila’s chief military commander. You spent the past year leading the troops on a second campaign against the Western Roman Empire. Yet still Rome flourishes. What have you to show for your efforts, besides a drunken army and another yellow-haired bitch for the King to marry?”

Orestes’ face darkened in fury and he tensed to lunge at the Hun, but warily dropped his guard as he saw Edeco’s hand moved to his sword hilt.

“We reduced Concordia, Altinum, and Patavium to ashes,” Orestes retorted angrily. “We captured Verona, as well as Vicetia, Brixia, and Bergomum. Even powerful Milan surrendered all its wealth to us—surely you received the news announcing our triumph. There in the palace we found a great mural of the Roman Emperors of East and West seated on their thrones, dividing the spoils of Scythia. Attila ordered the city’s artists to repaint the mural, to depict him towering over the two Romans as they poured golden coins at his feet.”

“Such a staggering blow against Rome’s artists,” Edeco replied flatly. “And after Milan, how far did you advance into Italia?”

Orestes glanced away sullenly.

“We advanced no further.”

“I’m told you met the old white-beard Leo, whom the Christians call their Pope.”

“Attila met with him, in private. He has discussed the matter with no one. I suspect Leo claimed Rome was plague-ridden, and that if we captured it the Huns would not long survive. When Alaric the Visigoth sacked the city forty years ago, he died soon afterwards...”

“So you let the King be swayed by an old priest. But then you are Christian yourself, are you not?”

“As was your own Scyri wife,” Orestes retorted, seething at the Hun’s insults to his honor, and at his own inability to defend it, “and as are your sons. Do you dare judge me? I did not see you in Italia advising Attila.”

“No,” Edeco replied. “Nor did you see any Eastern Roman legions attacking your back while you were most vulnerable. Who did you think dissuaded the Eastern Emperor Marcian from marching his troops from Constantinople and knocking you on your drunken arses while you were painting murals in Milan?”

“An easy claim to make. I didn’t see any African war elephants swimming the Mediterranean, either. That doesn’t mean you kept them away.”

“We will settle this later, German. Just you and me.”

Orestes smirked, and patted the hilt of his own knife.

“Indeed we will, Hun,” he growled. “With great pleasure.”

Two shadows emerged from the group of horsemen several paces back. A pair of young men stepped forward and flanked Edeco. Their tall stature and chestnut-brown hair were incongruous with their broad Hunnish faces and narrow eyes. Among the Huns of recent generations, bloodlines and parentage had become increasingly mixed. Yet despite their European features, their loyalties were clearly with the Hunnish squad leader.

“Is there a problem?” one of them muttered to Edeco, staring contemptuously at the German.

“No,” Edeco replied. “We will report to Attila and then find our beds for the night.”

“Your riders need not come,” growled Orestes.

“These are my sons. Odoacer and Onulf are captains of the Hunnish cavalry and they go where I command them.”

“The King,” Orestes insisted, “is not to be disturbed.”

Edeco paused just short of the entrance to the palace. He turned to his sons, his voice betraying only a hint of his barely controlled anger.

“Release the squad. Let them tend their horses, and muster at dawn. Then you two come back, and remain here outside the door.”

Without waiting for a response, Edeco then addressed Orestes.

“Enough of your chatter, German. Accompany me inside or tend the horses with my men, it is of no consequence to me. How stands the King?”

“‘Stands’ is not an accurate word,” Orestes muttered as he stepped angrily through the wooden door frame. “He has been stone drunk for three days now.”

Edeco paused.

“Drunk? The King does not get drunk.”

Orestes shrugged.

“Since his defeat by Rome two years ago, the King has not been the same. And since our siege at Aquileia, he gets drunk. Often.”

“Is he ill?”

“No, his body is well. He is past fifty, yet can still ride a day and a night without dismounting, and he remains the best Bowman and roper of all the Huns. He suffers frequent nosebleeds, though the *qam* has examined him and claims it is a good thing, as it purges him of evil humors.”

“Nosebleeds! If that’s all he suffers at fifty then he has no complaints.”

“No, his body is healthy...” the German repeated, as both men stepped into the dining hall of the plain, wood-frame structure that was the palace of the Hunnish king. Edeco took in the sight with a glance and stopped short in amazement.

“...it is his mind that suffers,” Orestes continued in a low voice.

The hall looked as if it had been hit by a great storm, as three days of unmitigated revelry had left it a shambles. Broken dining tables and furniture lay everywhere, topped by semi-conscious Hunnish and German officers sprawled drunk and snoring in the debris. The room was heavy with the stench of sweat and spoiled *airag* that had soaked into the carpets and soured. A thin, acrid smoke drifted through the air, the remnant of one of the large woolen wall tapestries that had caught fire earlier from a clumsily wielded torch. A young Hunnish warrior, whom Edeco recognized vaguely as a cavalry captain under the command of Attila's son Dengizich, struggled to his feet, glanced around blearily, then untied the drawstring at his waist and calmly pissed into a smoldering brazier, eliciting a hissing sound that caused him to grin in satisfaction. Zercon the dwarf crawled out from behind one of the toppled tables and scolded the soldier in pidgin Hunnish for his poor manners, and the warrior laughed and aimed the stream at him, causing the jester to scuttle back into his shelter.

On the dais at the head of the room Attila sat in his wooden throne, head slumped forward onto the table, hands spread before him. Edeco glanced around carefully, astonished at the lack of security—any peasant with a grudge could easily walk into the palace, dispatch the King, and walk out again, waving the bloody knife before him, and nobody would even think to stop him. Before assuming his diplomatic duties, he himself had been commander of the King's bodyguard—and a lapse such as this would have meant execution for him and all his men on duty that night. Now, his old responsibilities had been assumed by Orestes. Different commander, different discipline, obviously different results. But then, Attila himself was a different man as well.

The only alert faces in the entire room were at Attila's right side. There sat a young girl, perhaps fifteen years of age, her long golden hair dressed in complicated braids and wound tightly around her head. She wore a shimmering gown of pink and light blue, decorated with intricate patterns of glass studs and ornately embroidered hems. She sat immobile, the plate and goblet in front of her untouched, trails of dried tears marring her plump face as her gaze shifted between the sodden king sprawled on the table beside her, and the new arrivals.

To her right was an older man, clearly the maid's father, the Pannonian king, by the familiar way he touched her elbow and leaned over to whisper in her ear. He, too, wore imported finery, perhaps a wedding gift from Attila himself, and his face reflected not the sorrow and despair Edeco could see on the daughter's, but rather stoic detachment, resignation at losing the girl, tempered by satisfaction at making a valuable political alliance by betrothing her to a powerful monarch.

"Ildico," Orestes said. "The bride. She has sat there for three days now, scarcely moving, her food and drink untouched. She fears the wedding night, no doubt."

"Which is when?" Edeco asked.

Orestes smirked again as he glanced at the unconscious king.

"Tonight."

Edeco shook his head, in amazement and shame.

“A princess,” he muttered as he looked around the room. “A princess of swine. Orestes, you are commander of the guard, yet all your men are drunk. I myself will pick the valuables out of this trash.”

Turning his head, he gave a sharp whistle, eliciting angry curses from the dozing men around the room. Immediately Odoacer and Onulf stepped into the door, eyes wide at the scene of debauchery.

“Escort your King to the wedding tent,” Edeco ordered them.

The two young men nodded silently. Stepping over to Attila, they lifted him between them, draped his arms over their shoulders, and began half-walking, half-dragging him across the room. Ildico and her father rose and began to follow, and Orestes and Edeco fell into step behind.

The wedding tent was a circular structure of felted wool constructed in the center of the outside courtyard, in full view of all the palace inhabitants and Attila’s other local wives, who numbered some fifty. It was a ceremonial structure, reminiscent of the Huns’ traditional lodgings on the plains during the summer horse-roping campaigns, yet it was far from the modest shelter used in those workday environments. Every fiber of it was draped with brightly hued carpets, pennants, and blankets, like a colorful jewel set among the otherwise drab, wood-plank structures of the palace compound. It had been erected in the courtyard at the very beginning of the wedding ceremony and would stand like a threat or an invitation until the morning after the marriage’s consummation. On that day, after publicly displaying the bloodied marriage sheets as evidence of the new bride’s virginity and the King’s virility, the festivities would be declared at an end, the tent would be disassembled, the camp-city would return to its normal business, and the new bride would be shown to her future accommodations, the women’s quarters with the King’s other wives.

As the small party stooped through the tent’s low door and entered, Ildico began sobbing loudly and her father commenced wringing his hands, his carefully cultivated reserve vanishing as he saw the feather-filled floor mattress on which his daughter would lay with her drunken new husband.

“How will he consummate?” the Pannonian king asked in anguish, looking at Orestes in hopes the fellow German might sympathize with his plight. “With all due respect, the King of the Huns cannot even walk! If he cannot do the deed, there will be no blood on the sheet in the morning to prove my daughter was a virgin, and people will suspect her virtue!”

The brothers dropped Attila onto the mattress, then stood. Orestes bent to pull off the King’s boots.

“There will be blood on the sheet, old man,” Orestes growled, straightening Attila’s legs. “We’ll take it from elsewhere if we have to. Watch that it’s not from you.”

“But my daughter cannot lie with him in that state! It will be impossible!”

“She will not lie with him anyway. Attila takes his wives standing.”

“Standing? Like an animal? This is how the Huns treat their women?”

Orestes glared at him, in no mood to explain to this petty king, this tribal chiefling, how Attila's recent nosebleeds were exacerbated when he exerted himself horizontally. Custom had nothing to do with Attila's new predilection for a vertical position in things sexual. It was, rather, a question of hygiene.

"You insult the king," Orestes replied. "You may now be his father-in-law, but you insult him, before your daughter has even proven her worth." He grinned maliciously. "Your people are farmers, you should know animals: An ox plows a deeper furrow standing up than lying down."

At these words Ildico, who had slumped in exhausted silence on a rug against the wall, blanched and burst into a new round of sobs.

"I've had enough," Edeco said in disgust. He gestured for his two sons, the girl's father, and Orestes to exit, and then, taking a last look at his snoring commander and the terrified bride, he, too, stepped out into the warm night air and let the tent flap drop in place behind him.

Outside, as the party dispersed to their separate quarters, he took his sons aside.

"Six hours still until dawn," he muttered, "and there's not a guard in the entire city I can trust tonight to stand watch at the King's door. You two stay. I know you have been riding all day, but you are young—it is an old man's prerogative to go to bed, and that I will do. I will be at the king's apartments, in the palace. And I will send a relief at dawn, if I can find one sober."

The brothers nodded, and Edeco strode off, suddenly feeling the full weight of his own fifty years, and of the efforts he had made of late, both physically and mentally. He was a Hun, he reflected, born for riding, for the steppe, for hunting the fleet-footed antelope, and the even fleeter-footed Persians and Alani. No man is meant to survive under roofs day after day, eating delicacies and being primped by eunuchs until his muscles grow soft and his will dissipates like smoke—yet that was precisely how he had been living the past six months in the Eastern Roman court, spinning tales and pulling tricks and performing feints and lies, like Zercon the palace dwarf, all to convince the Emperor Marcian of Attila's peaceful intentions toward Constantinople, even as the massive Hunnish army marched upon Marcian's co-emperor in Rome. It was not as difficult as it might sound, for Edeco had learned long ago that most men will believe that which is easiest to believe—and it was much easier for Marcian to simply do nothing and enjoy the pleasures of his court, than to see the clear truth: that half the Roman world was being viciously mauled, and that once it had been dispatched, the victorious Hunnish army would turn its sights on the other half.

Admitting this was simply too difficult for Marcian. It would require effort, mustering the army, calling in the border garrisons, engaging new recruits—all of which are expensive, and time-consuming tasks. Much easier to ignore the problem and trust that the Huns truly meant no harm to the Eastern Empire—which it was precisely Edeco's job to convince him of.

But in those six months Edeco had grown soft and weary, and he felt the strain. So, too, had his sons—fine, strong lads, the only vestige of the one wife he had married of his own choosing, a Scyri slave girl he had captured on a raid into eastern Germania a quarter of a century before and whose name he had

not mentioned since her death years ago. The two younger men had been frustrated at their prolonged exposure to the decadence and filth of city life in Constantinople, but had never uttered a word of complaint in his hearing. Yet the look on their faces when he received word that Attila had retreated back to his camp, and that there was no longer a need for the Hunnish embassy in Constantinople, was one of utter delight. As joint captains of the small cavalry squadron that traveled to the Eastern Roman capital, they had raced off to inform their troops, and within an hour the squadron had packed its gear and was ready to depart. That was a month ago—a month of hard riding, difficult river-crossings, and wormy hardtack purchased at inflated prices from stony-faced market crones displeased at having to deal with Huns, even those merely passing through their miserable trading villages. A month spent on the bony, ridged backs of the tireless Hunnish steppe ponies.

It had been the best month of Edeco's life.

Before he was even aware he had fallen asleep, he felt a hand shaking his shoulder. He struggled to clear his mind and open his eyes.

"Father."

It was Odoacer's voice. Edeco rubbed his eyes and looked around. It was still dark, and the room was lit only by a faltering torch. He was lying on his old cot in the guard room just outside Attila's empty bedchamber.

"Father!" his son repeated. "I think the King is unwell."

"Unwell?" Edeco repeated. "What do you mean? Where is Onulf?"

"Onulf remains at the wedding tent on guard. The girl is weeping."

The older man scoffed.

"Weeping? It is her wedding night, she is a virgin, and she is locked in her room with a drunken king. Wake me if she's *not* weeping—then I will be worried."

"No, Father—she is frantic. And there is no sound from the King. He does not laugh, nor even beat her to silence her."

Edeco considered this a moment.

"And did you enter to see if there is a problem?"

"I dared not. What if there was no problem, and I entered at the wrong moment? The King..."

"Meet me at the tent in a moment. Find that Germanic idiot Orestes and tell him what you have just told me. I do not wish to be the only man to interrupt the King while he is 'plowing his furrow.'"

A moment later the four men stood outside the tent door, listening as the girl inside sobbed loudly. Their whispered entreaties to her through the heavy felted walls had been to no avail. Either she did not hear, or she was ignoring them. Carefully testing the door, they found it barred from inside, and so impossible to stealthily insert a head to inquire. Orestes glanced at the sky.

"Dawn in one hour," he said tersely. "The wives in the women's quarters are already awake and restless..."

“They are always awake when Attila takes a new wife,” replied Edeco. “They are praying she will beget dwarves who will not compete with their own children.”

“Nevertheless,” Orestes continued, “the girl’s infernal crying will soon have the entire palace staff talking, and then the city itself. It must be stopped.”

“It must *be* stopped?” Edeco glared at him. “Are all Germans as helpless as you?”

Without further discussion, he drew his dagger and quickly thrust it into the fabric of the tent at the level of his eyes. Inside, the girl’s crying immediately ceased. With a quick sawing motion, he drew the blade horizontally across the fabric wall, and then straight down at a right angle, cutting to the plank flooring on the bottom. Without further hesitation he stepped inside.

All was as they had left it, down to the guttering, Roman-style ceramic lamps on the table. The girl herself had scarcely moved from the corner rug where she had first thrown herself upon entering the tent hours earlier, and now sat motionless, watching the intruders with wide, tear-filled eyes. Warily, Edeco looked on every side for threat or attack before finally settling his gaze on the middle of the room. The King lay on the bed just as they had placed him earlier. Nothing seemed to have changed.

Annoyed, Edeco seized one of the small lamps and stepped forward, followed close behind by Orestes. The King had slept through his wedding night. Unfortunate, but not unexpected, and certainly nothing to have merited Ildico’s frantic sobbing.

“What in Hades are we in here for, girl?” Orestes snapped. “What is the reason for such disrespect for your new husband...”

His voice trailed off as the two men approached the bed and looked down. In the shadows they had seen nothing, but now the glow of the lamp reflected a dark, spreading stain on the sheet beneath the King’s head. Edeco set down the lamp and seized the king’s shoulders, pulling him to a sitting position.

As he did, his head slumped forward and blood poured from his mouth into his lap in thick, gurgling stream. The girl shrieked and hid her head beneath a pillow. Edeco stared wordlessly and Orestes froze, before he, too, grabbed one of Attila’s shoulders and helped to gently lay him back down on the bed. Blood continued to flow, and the king stared upward, eyes glassy in the dim light.

Orestes stood up and strode to Ildico, drawing his dagger. The girl’s eyes opened wide and she fell silent, her face glowing white in the dim lamplight. The German’s eyes narrowed and flashed fury as he seized her hair and jerked her roughly to her feet.

“Decades of battle failed to destroy the mighty Attila,” he growled, “yet this treacherous hellcat has done in her own husband on her wedding night.” He threw the girl’s head back and raised his blade to her pale throat.

“Wait,” Edeco ordered, still examining the cadaver on the blood-drenched bed. “The girl is not at fault. The King has drowned—a nosebleed, while he was drunk. In his own blood, he has drowned!”

Orestes paused for a moment, then grudgingly released the girl, who collapsed onto the strewn carpets where she had spent the night. Edeco stood and stepped back from the king’s bed, staring stony-

faced at the cadaver. Then, without a word, he crossed the tent, shouldered past the dumfounded Orestes, and stepped back out the slit he had made in the wall. Standing between his two sons, he gazed around in silence, glancing up at the reddening streaks of the sky in the east, listening to the soft morning sounds of the enormous camp, the murmur of women stoking cooking fires, the cackling of the domesticated Persian fowls awaiting their ration of seed. He sighed, a slow expulsion of breath from the depths of his chest. After a moment, seizing a handful of hair at his temple, he grimaced, and pulled it in a bloody clump from his scalp.

Lifting high the sacrifice of pain, he raised a shrill, keening wail, calling out his own name in his lamentation of the dead. For a moment, the camp fell silent, and then other voices, too, lifted in song, the ancient Hunnish hymn of mourning. As yet, the people did not know for whom they cried, knowing only that it was for a man of merit, for the swelling song had originated in the throat of Edeco, one of the great men of the Hunnish nation, and a man of Edeco's rank did not cry in mourning except for a man of merit to him.