

PANNONIA, 453 C.E.

The barbarian encampment was enormous, a great city that moved from place to place at the whim of its unquestioned ruler, the High King. But in the dim light of this predawn morning it was in chaos. Hundreds of thousands of warriors and their shrieking women and ungovernable offspring milled about. Hundreds of thousands of horses, cattle, sheep, and goats all bleated and neighed in the general alarm and made the dawn a cacophony of sounds. The stink of the livestock competed with the smoke of ten thousand fires being fanned to life at once.

Priscus's manservant had pulled him from his bed, certain that they were about to lose their lives in the sudden commotion in the barbarian horde. Priscus hurried along over the uneven soil, trying not to turn an ankle in a wagon rut or step in a hole. He followed Ellak, trying in vain to keep up with him in a pair of light sandals made for walking on the smooth pavements of Constantinople.

Ellak was a fighter, a man descended from famous warriors, who had lived to adulthood by the strength and speed of his limbs.

As Priscus caught sight of the huge animal-skin tent of the High King, its center pole as tall as a villa and its floor wide enough to hold hundreds, he could hear wailing and shouting and knew what must have happened in the night. He slowed enough to remain upright and maintain his Roman dignity. He was a diplomat, and, by default, the man who must write the history of this momentous day. Ellak, the High King's son, had come for him because Priscus was the most learned man for many leagues and might know of a way to save the High King's life. But the wailing might mean they were arriving too late.

Priscus hid his feeling of fear. The barbarians were in his way, running about, whipping one another into a fury. They could smell fear like dogs. They were trained and experienced killers from birth who had conquered their way from remotest Asia to Europe by sheer ferocity. When they'd heard shouting, they'd rushed outside, and would no more have come without their swords and daggers than without their hands and feet. Today, if any of them sensed fear in him—a foreigner—they would tear him apart without warning.

Ellak led him into the High King's vast tent. Priscus was nearly a head taller than most of the barbarians, who were from the distant east, short and broad, with wide shoulders and thick arms and legs, their faces like tanned leather. Priscus could see over the heads of some of the men who were blocking the inner chamber. That was where the King must be. The warriors standing nearest to the chamber were already pulling out their short daggers and cutting their cheekbones with deep slashes so the blood would run down in streaks like tears.

Priscus made his way by stepping sideways and slipping between the half-mad guards. Now he could see the High King's young bride, Ildico, crouching on the pile of rich carpets in the corner as far away from her husband as she could get. She was weeping, but nobody was comforting her. Priscus couldn't see anyone who even seemed to notice her.

As one of the guards turned to face his friends to let them watch as he mutilated his face with a short sword, Priscus slipped behind him into the chamber. He looked down at the body of the High King and could see why the young bride looked so shocked. The great barbarian, the *Flagellum Dei*, was sprawled on his back on the soft silk bed, his mouth open like a snoring drunk. Blood ran down from his nose and mouth into a wet pool at his head.

Priscus stepped to the corner and lifted the girl Ildico from where she cowered. He pushed aside the long blond hair from her ear and whispered, 'It's all right. He's gone now, and there's nothing more you can do here. Come.' It was all just soothing talk, just a human voice to comfort her without saying anything. Ildico was the High King's seventh wife, and in spite of her beauty she was barely more than a child, brought from her Germanic tribe to marry the conqueror. She understood Priscus's Latin as well as her own Gothic, but he wasn't sure which languages the guards spoke so said little. He helped her out into the light of the rising sun and the fresh air. She looked pale and weak like a ghost. He was

hoping to get her away from the crowd before some warrior suspected the King's death was her fault. The ignorant were often suspicious, and even if a person died of a lightning strike, someone might have conjured it.

He spotted a few of her female retainers, the group of servants and kinswomen who had come with her for her wedding. They were standing a distance off, watching the proceedings anxiously. He turned her over to them and they hurried her away from the growing crowd.

Priscus was still looking in that direction to be sure she wasn't stopped when strong hands roughly gripped both his arms. He craned his neck to see his captors. He barely recognized either of them, although he'd seen them every time he'd come to meet with the High King. They both had fresh mourning cuts on their cheekbones, so blood covered the lower half of their faces. They had changed in demeanor since Priscus had sat with them last night, laughing and drinking to celebrate their lord's wedding. The two men dragged him into the King's tent, and the crowd of warriors parted to let them pass into the inner chamber.

Inside the chamber, the body had not been moved. Standing over it were Ardaric, King of the Gepids, and Onegesius, Attila's most trusted friend. Ardaric knelt and picked up the jug of wine that the High King had drunk before he'd died. He said, 'This is the wine that Ildico poured him last night.' Onegesius picked up the goblet lying beside the King.

Priscus said, 'For weeks, he had a sickness that gave him nosebleeds. Maybe it got worse while he slept and he drowned in his own blood. That's what it looks like, doesn't it?'

Ardaric snorted in contempt. 'Nobody dies of a nosebleed. He's been in battle all his life. He was wounded many times and never bled to death. It was poison.'

'Do you think so?' asked Priscus, his eyes wide in shock.

'I do,' said Ardaric. 'And I've been thinking about you. Emperor Theodosius sent you to us four years ago with the ambassador Maximinus. Your interpreter, Vigilas, was caught in a plot to assassinate Attila. Instead of having all of you killed, Attila sent you back to your emperor in Constantinople. Maybe that was a mistake. And maybe Vigilas was not the only one who came to kill the King.'

Onegesius poured wine into Attila's goblet, then held it out. 'Prove you didn't poison him. Drink it.'

Priscus said, 'I don't know if it's poisoned or not. If the wine is poisoned, that won't prove I was the poisoner. I certainly wasn't in here with the High King and his bride on their wedding night. All my drinking it might do is kill me too.'

'Your fear convicts you.' Onegesius's free hand moved toward the hilt of his sword.

Priscus took the goblet. 'If I die, remember I'm an innocent man.' He lifted it to his lips and drained it.

The others waited and watched Priscus closely. Ellak stepped closer. 'Well, Priscus?'

'I don't feel anything. It tastes like wine.'

'Bitter? Sour?'

'Like all other wine—sweet like fruit, but with a few drops of vinegar.'

Ardaric sniffed the goblet, took some of the wine on his finger, and put a drop on his tongue. He nodded to Onegesius, dropped the goblet on the carpet by the body of the High King, and walked out. He called out to the warriors, 'There was no poison. He died of a sickness.'

Priscus followed Ardaric out of the chamber and made his way through the milling crowd of warriors. With their anguished, blood-streaked faces, they made a frightening sight. These were men who had never done anything in their lives but kill. They fought, ate, sometimes even slept, on horseback. They had, in about three generations, conquered tribes from the grasslands beyond the Volga to Gaul. This morning their greatest leader had been taken from them. Who could say what their grief and anger might make them do to a stranger from a foreign country?

Priscus walked briskly with his head down, not letting his eyes rest on any of the warriors streaming toward the High King's tent. He went to his own quarters and prepared an altar with a row of lighted candles for the purpose of praying for Attila's soul. After all, Attila had listened to Priscus and the other Romans when they talked of Christianity. And once he had met with Pope Leo at Mantua and made an agreement. Something might have planted a seed of faith in his mind. In any case, it was best to mourn him as visibly as possible. Priscus also vomited, and drank a great deal of water, and then vomited again, and found it settled his nerves.

Late in the day he left his own small tent and walked toward the center of the encampment. He saw that the High King's tent had been struck. Not far off, a large open space had been cleared. What had arisen on that spot was an immense white vision. He walked to it and touched it in wonder.

A vast tent made entirely of white silk had been erected. It moved and billowed in the breeze as he walked to the opening and looked inside. In the center was a bier that displayed the body of the High King, lying in state, in bright and costly clothes of purple and red befitting a warrior king, and with arms of the finest quality inlaid with gold and gems.

Around the bier rode the savage horsemen, the High King's best warriors, many of them kings of their own tribes and nations. They were riding around and around in a circle singing of his exploits and victories, their faces cut so the blood ran down their cheeks like tears. They sang that he was the greatest chieftain, a man who deserved not just the pale tears of women but the red tears of warriors. As they rode in their circle, Priscus could see that the blood soaked their beards and dripped from their chins onto their clothes and horses' manes.

Priscus knelt in the direction of the King and touched his forehead to the dirt so the warriors would see he was showing respect in his own way, then returned to his own shelter. He remained there for the next three days, writing about the life of Attila as High King and his death on his wedding night. Visitors came to Priscus and related the prodigious feats of mourning they had seen, and a few talked about the rivalry between Ellak, the oldest son, and Dengizich, the second oldest, and the resentment of Emakh, the third son, whom the two seemed not to take into account. Still others told him of Ardaric's disgust that the three sons couldn't remain united even until their father was buried.

Priscus went to the white tent the next day and found the High King being prepared for burial in the fiery light of a hundred flaming lamps. Attila's retainers placed him in a series of three coffins. The outer and largest one was made of iron. The coffin placed inside it was made of solid silver. The third was pure gold. The coffins were packed with the jeweled weapons of the many kings Attila had defeated. He had absorbed a hundred Asian tribes, beaten the Alans, Ostrogoths, Armenians, Burgundians, had savaged the Balkans, Thrace, Scythia, and Gaul. He had sacked Mantua, Milan, Verona, and taken most of northern Italy. He had defeated the legions of both the western and eastern capitals of Rome and Constantinople.

Also in the three coffins were breathtaking heaps of glittering gems and glowing gold, reflecting the flames of the lamps, and the coffins themselves were a great fortune. Priscus couldn't help thinking the inner one had probably been composed of the Eastern Roman Empire's annual tribute to Attila of two thousand one hundred pounds of gold. But he couldn't ignore the flashes of color inside—the cool green of emeralds, the blood-drop rubies, the deep blue sapphires. There were fiery garnets, indigo lapis, yellow amber, pea green jade, all competing for the eye's attention.

At nightfall a group of a thousand horsemen drawn from Attila's personal troop of bodyguards assembled. They placed the lids on the coffins, lifted them onto a huge eight-wheeled wagon that could carry the immense weight, and rode off, carrying no torches to light the way through the darkness.

Weeks later, Priscus was preparing a donkey train for the long trek back to report to the Emperor Marcian. It would take him a month to get from this savage country to the palaces of Constantinople, and by now he would have gladly crawled back on his hands and knees. Then in the afternoon another commotion swept through the camp, with people pointing fingers into the distance and yelling in their many tongues, so he went to investigate.

The elite horsemen of the burial detail were returning to the great encampment of the Huns. They came galloping, and the dust was visible across the plain for a long time before they appeared.

Ardaric, Onegesius, and the three sons of Attila—Ellak, Dengizich, and Emakh—and a great host of warriors, gathered at the edge of the encampment to greet them. When the thousand riders drew up, they dismounted and bowed to the assembled chiefs. In a singular honor, the chiefs bowed back. Ellak, the eldest heir of Attila, stepped up to the leader of the burial party, a man named Mozhu. He put his hand on Mozhu's shoulder and said, 'Tell us.'

Mozhu said, 'We took the High King to a place in the bend of a river far away where travelers seldom pass. We built a crypt as deep as two men are tall, with a sloping entrance, and carried the coffins to the bottom. Then we covered the crypt and the sloping passage. We herded our thousand horses across the area many times until it was impossible to pick out the precise spot where the crypt was buried. Then we diverted the river so it will flow deep over the High King's tomb forever.'

Ellak embraced Mozhu. Then he stood on an oxcart and made a speech to thank the thousand men who had stood with his father in battle and protected his body in death. Before he jumped down, he called out, 'Kill them now.'

The thousand men were engulfed by the great host of warriors around them. To Priscus, the thousand seemed to disappear like swimmers pulled under the water in a flood—a head here going down, a few heads there. They sank beneath the weight of the entire army. He saw none of the burial party resist or try to remount their horses to escape. He could not tell whether it was because their execution was a surprise or because they had certain foreknowledge that anyone who knew where Attila was buried must die.

Afterward, the burial party's bodies were covered with earth where they had fallen. Their leaders spoke of their loyalty, honor, and bravery. To Priscus it seemed the Huns considered the massacre simply a natural and inevitable part of the death of a great leader. It was all a single misfortune.

Priscus left the vast encampment at dawn the next morning with his train of a hundred fifty donkeys loaded with supplies and a few precious articles hidden among them—his written account of his mission to the barbarians, his personal books, a few souvenirs from barbarian friends. He also took with him the teenage bride-widow Ildico, whom he had promised to return to her parents in the Germanic territories when passage could be arranged.

When they were a day's journey from the barbarian encampment, he walked beside Ildico's donkey and talked with her. 'See, child? I told you it was all perfectly safe. Once the barbarians were persuaded there was no poison, you and I could hardly be poisoners.'

'I heard they made you drink the wine. Why are you alive?'

'The poison has to be given over time before it will cause bleeding and keep the blood from clotting. I've been giving it to Attila for weeks. Enough had to build up in his body so your final dose would make him bleed to death. But think more pleasant thoughts. You'll be very rich soon.'

'Keep any gold that's coming to me,' she said. 'I did it for my people that he killed. Just get me home.'

'The Emperor will want to send you home with a reward. What you and I did has probably saved the Empire from destruction.'

'I don't care about the Empire.'

He walked on ahead, thinking. He had done everything perfectly—gathered the sweet clover himself, patiently aged it to let it turn moldy, and then used it to make a poison that couldn't be detected and caused a death which looked like a disease. As he walked he composed parts of his account of his time with the Huns. He would describe it all—his mission four years ago with Maximinus, when the assassination plan was blamed on the interpreter Vigilas, the actions of the barbarians, the personality of their supreme leader.

He would, of course, leave out the particulars of the High King's death. Every trick not explained remains fresh for reuse. The Western Empire in Rome would be overwhelmed by its enemies before much longer. Its legions couldn't keep fighting off wave after wave of barbarians, each group more numerous and savage than the last. It was a simple game of numbers. The subtler methods of the Eastern Empire obliterated numbers—the Emperor had sent just one man to end the threat from the Huns, hadn't he? The Eastern Empire would live for another thousand years.

Ildico certainly was a beautiful young woman, he thought. The slim, graceful figure, the milky skin, and the golden hair were very appealing. In a way, having her for himself would make his quiet triumph over the great Attila complete. But no, he thought. That was exactly the sort of thing an emissary from Rome would do.