

CHAPTER TWO

"They are saying that even the gods bend to your command, that shades gibber and squeak into your ear," Edecon told me.

He had just reported that Apikal's men were tumbling from their horses in droves, spewing their vomit before them: just as I had foreseen. How had I known? All I knew was the consequence: the men who had followed me through belief in my prophecy, or because they knew I would lead them to victory, now followed me from fear as well.

I did not advance to the walls of Constantinople. Everyone knew one of the reasons: to keep my armies clear of Apikal's men, who lay between us and the walls. I had to ensure that my men didn't sicken and die as well. There was another reason, but besides me only Edecon knew it from his spies: we should have launched our attack earlier. The city's walls had tumbled from an earthquake in early winter; the whole city had rallied to rebuild and even extend them. Yet, if I had followed close on the heels of Apikal, my men would have succumbed to the "weakness in the bowels" that was decimating his men.

Instead, I sent my warriors to occupy all the western hinterlands from Pontus to Propontus, and then waited outside the fortress of Athyrus for the Emperor to respond.

I waited only five days.

He sent Anatolius, his ambassador, and Theodulos, the commander of his defeated armies in Thrace. They were ushered into my presence before my tent, pitched close to the ruins of the fortress; Athyrus still smoked behind me. My army's campfires dotted the steep meadows around us, their horses pastured everywhere, reaching even for the pieces of grass growing out of rocks at the tops of outcroppings.

The face of the Ambassador, Anatolius, was that of an ascetic: thin and pinched. His body was that of a voluptuary: large and loose, with a great belly that rolled beneath his flowing white *paenula* as he plodded towards me. Beside him, lean and neat in his armor, with steel gray hair and sharp blue eyes, paced Theodulos, a chained wolf.

Behind them crowded their retainers: soldiers in gleaming parade armor, and court sycophants in billowing robes.

"Permit only the Ambassador and the General to approach me; keep the others back!" I told my guards.

The two continued forward, then prostrated themselves.

I glowered at them. After all, I was the one who would dictate terms: intimidation was a game of the powerful.

I pointed an accusing finger. "You Romans! You, who thought you could ignore us! You city dwellers, who thought you could outsmart us! Where are your armies now, Theodulos? Who holds all the lands to the very walls of your city? What has happened to all the Thracian wine and oil, all the villas and farms, all the towns and cities of Thrace and Dacia and Moesia? I'll tell you," I paused for effect. "I hold them. All of them. I hold the power of life and death over all these lands. I can snap my fingers and a man will die-or a city! So! What have you come for, Anatolius?"

I had encountered the ambassador before. He had negotiated with Rugila. He had been slim and young, then.

Anatolius raised his head. "We come, Great King Attila," his voice was chastened, like a small child, "we come to ask what terms you demand in order to return to your own country."

"My own country? We Huns ride wherever we wish--unless you pay us enough to stay away. But..." I toyed with the idea, "Thrace is a pleasant clime. And rich. Now, tell me, Anatolius, or you Theodulos, since by your name you are Greek: didn't the Romans take this land from others? Didn't they crush the Greeks under their heel? And then they stayed. Now these same Romans say it's theirs, but it isn't, you see. I hold it. Why shouldn't I stay? I've gained a taste for Thracian wine." I snapped my fingers and Ultinzur's son brought me my olivewood goblet. It was filled with local wine. I sipped it. "Mmm. Good." I surveyed the ambassador and general. Both looked up at me, mouths open, as if they couldn't believe what I had just said. The wine was full-bodied, a little astringent.

I smiled at them. "Well, what would you do," I asked, using a reasonable tone of voice, "if you were owed six thousand pounds of gold, but your debtor refused to pay? Your miserable Emperor," I roared, "owes four and a half years tribute! He must pay it!"

Anatolius and Theodulos gasped. Then I could see the figure sinking in: a little over four times 1400. Ah, the Emperor had already agreed to pay that amount--large as it was--each year. Slowly, their faces took on the shrewd, calculating masks these Roman-Greeks wore when dealing with "Barbarians."

"But," I shouted, to keep them off balance, "that is just the beginning: the repayment of past debts."

Both men withdrew their heads, like turtles, huddling in the face of danger.

"For his intransigence, he must pay an additional 2,100 pounds of gold this year, and thereafter: 700 pounds more than our last settlement."

"Every year?" squeaked Anatolius.

"Each and every year. Without fail--unless you want me to ride through here again." I glimpsed Onegesius and Walamir watching from the side. Their grins took up most of their faces.

The Romans conferred together in whispers, their faces gray.

"But that is not all!" I shouted. I enjoyed seeing them wince at my voice. "All deserters must be returned, all fugitives surrendered." If I could stop the flow of Huns, and others into the Roman armies, then I would hold the whip-hand in all of Europe. I had demanded this before, but until now it would have been unenforceable. I knew how to enforce it now.

"Further," I resumed my conversational voice, "if you want your soldiers returned, the price is ten *solidi* per head." The price before had been eight. "As for the wealthy civilians," I thought happily of all the notables we'd captured, and of all their families quaking in their gold encrusted villas in the capital city, "their people will have to make their own arrangements--or they'll be sold in the slave markets with all the others."

[I had no family, no ransom! Would that the Great King had sold me in the slave market! At least I would be among the civilized once again.]

I gloated, watching the faces of the ambassador and general: grave, stricken even, but hopeful that the worst was over. They didn't expect what would come next.

"That is not all!"

They cringed.

"We control the whole Danube, from Sirmium to Durostorum, the whole of Thrace and Dacia, and enough of Macedonia to bring the rest into question. There is nothing between us and the walls of Constantinople save grass." They probably didn't

even know that Apikal's dying horde was not under my control. "In order for us to leave this green and pleasant land, what must you give us?" I leaned forward, playing reasonable now. "I'll tell you. Never again must you fortify our great river, the Danube. You must never establish hostile camps along the borderlands of our great Empire. You see, we need inducement to leave--not just the payments of gold we deserve for protecting your northern boundaries."

The horror on the Romans' faces was like wine to me. "Ah, but we will be happy to go back to "our own" country, as you put it, when all the defenses, so-called, have been dismantled, and" I paused for dramatic effect, then shouted, "when all the land on the right bank of our river, the Danube, from Singidinum to Novae, shall be laid waste. The desolation shall extend for five days ride south of the river--for the length of five days ride for one unencumbered." I nodded to them, resuming my conversational tone of voice. "When you agree that there will be no cities, no towns, no villages, no settlements, no peasants, and especially no armed camps or fortifications in this whole region, then we will withdraw--after ensuring that the conditions are fulfilled, of course."

"Now, I suppose you think these are difficult terms, hostile terms, but I assure you, I am only setting out the minimum conditions for a just peace. The zone of uninhabited land is to ensure that the frictions between our two great empires come to an end, you see. A buffer. Naissus, now not much more than ruins, shall mark the southern limit of this uninhabited mark, the northernmost extreme of your Empire." I couldn't help chuckling at how horrifying this must sound to them. The empty land would make it difficult for my people to sneak across to Constantinople to sell their services. The thought of all those cities and towns lying in ruins was doubly gratifying, grass growing

between the stones as it did in Maracanda. "Now, my most Excellent Ambassador and Honorable General, what do you think of my terms?"

They looked up at me, their eyes hollow with horror, their faces gray and shiny with nervous sweat.

I smiled slowly. "That is my price for leaving these lands. Agree to it, begin to fulfill the conditions, and we will withdraw. If not..." I shrugged, "well, Thrace is a green and pleasant land...."

Anatolius and Theodulos stared at each other, then both turned to me. "These are harsh terms, Great King Attila," muttered Anatolius, for once without elegant words.

"Theodulos," I asked, "where are your armies?"

He shook his head, saying something in Greek to the Ambassador: probably that they had no choice but to accept whatever I demanded.

Slowly, wearily, the Ambassador nodded to me. It was as if his head weighed a wagon-load of gold. "I must take these terms to the Emperor, himself."

"Do that." I stood and pointed at the ground. "We shall await your speedy reply. Right...here."

[The man is a devil, a demon incarnate! I had no idea. My homeland laid waste! What can I do, in my small way, to fight back? I pledge to my God that I will outlive him if He gives me strength. Let him maunder and rant of his claims, let him brag of his conquests. I will keep this account and in the end I will render his uncountable sins in an account before the Lord, My God.]