

CHAPTER ONE

I am Zerco.

Some have wondered how I, the son of a Moorish chief, a dark man of the northern Atlas mountains of Numidia, became the court jester to the wild Huns of the windswept plains, as far to the north of civilization as I had been to the south in my youth. How did I gain this twisted body, these horrible claw marks down my chest, when I say I had been a fine slim youth, and a warrior? And how was it that I became the last confidant of King Rugila, fled from Attila, and yet won from the dread Attila what I value most?

Some may wonder why the blue-eyed demons who vandalize Italy and carry off everything of value to their captured castles in my native land, avoid our little village, my manor, my beautiful wife, Esla, and the lovely children of my old age. Once these blond bandits brought their King to me, Geiseric himself. Their gimp-legged king limped into my reception hall--and asked forgiveness for their intrusion.

Now, all around me, tumble the haughty edifices of the late, unlamented Roman Empire. Matters of state no longer concern me. My center, the foundation stone of my power, more precious than the greatest jewel, is safe in our little valley. On the plains and in the Italies, Empires have blown away like summer dust. Attila is but a bitter memory, and my patrons, Emperor Valentinian and General Aetius, died violent deaths. But here, we are a green meadow, a shaded dell.

This is my story.

I began in the high mountains of the northern Atlas, above the Tell. A sharp and rugged land, it was too stony and barren for the ever-encroaching Roman colonists. Even their legions never stayed long. They mounted expeditions into our hidden valleys, pursuing us to our sun-drenched crags, but they would soon withdraw, usually with a few of our young men as captives--friends we would never see again.

The Romans hoped, I later learned, to punish us, to stop us from raiding down into the fertile lands. But how could we stop? Those were our lands. Our fathers' fathers' fathers ruled over them long ago.

I was born in a sunny hut of sun-baked brick, while my father, Manessas, the chief, was off on one of his forays to a Roman city we called Kanoupha. While most of our tribespeople herded sheep and cattle, my father and a small warrior nobility felt such labor beneath them. After all, the rich Roman towns, the luxurious settlements spreading up into the foothills, even the bustling cities, firmly astraddle the narrow coastal plain, were standing on land that was rightly ours. The wealth these intruders wrung from the land with their numberless slaves--some of them our own people--was therefore rightly ours as well.

My father was merely asserting our people's right to that wealth when he was killed--at the same moment that I emerged squalling into the too-bright world.

The chief was dead. I grew to consciousness not as the chief's son, but as his nephew, since my uncle succeeded to the leadership of the little band. He was no less adventurous than my father, only luckier. One of his sons, and then a grandson, have probably succeeded him by now.

As son of the old chief and nephew to the new, I was favored by the tribe. Still, my uncle had two sons, and they took precedence over me. They were pushy brats, but I was enough older that I had no need to fight them. I was noble, not a mere herdsman. I learned how to wield the sword and spear.

Early one morning in my fifteenth winter, my uncle Micipsa told me that I was coming with him on a raid into the rich lowlands. Looking around at the mounted men in the gray near dawn, I realized we were a ragged little band. Only Micipsa and I had steel helmets. Some had caps of horn and hardened leather, others did without. A few wore Roman breastplates, my uncle and I among them. Our weapons were largely stolen: Roman short swords, Roman spearpoints. My people did know the secret of iron and steel, and in fact made better than the Roman's far to the south, close to the great empty desert. But Moorish steel was scarce and precious, because up in the near mountains forges were too heavy to move, and our camps moved continually to stay ahead of the usurpers.

I had lived all my life in small huts of sun-dried brick, under roofs bound with twigs. For much of the year, men and women lived out beneath the great sky, the bright stars telling us the tale of the ages every night, and of the eons yet to come. We needed shelter only when the seasonal rains fell in torrential fury.

We milled about in the gray light, and I was alarmed to see additional horses without riders.

“Why do we take so many mounts?” I asked, dreading the arrival of my two cousins. Had they demanded to come along, since “Cousin Zerco” was going?

My uncle snorted: “Would you load the sacks of meal, the great jugs of oil and wine on your back, Nephew? We go on a provisioning expedition. We’ll have need of them--and then some--if the Goddess rides with us!”

I almost clapped my hands. My cousins were not coming to spoil the party, and our return would be a cause for celebration.

Imagine my first view of a Roman town! Slaves lived in huts that were bigger than ours, beside the larger walls, but citizens built tremendous mansions, larger, I later discovered, than in their native Rome. The huge complex of white walls gleamed in the early sun of the flat land. Columns of tall temples, many recently converted to Christian churches, rose even higher.

For all the walls, the town’s gates were open and undefended. It did have a garrison, my uncle told me, on its southern flank. This was supposed to defend the region from invaders, but we were small enough in numbers to escape notice. We rode round to the eastern side, through plowed fields. We could never take the town, just some of the riches within it.

We rode down a long, stone-paved boulevard, high white walls on either side, broken by small doorways and impressive gateways. Nearer to the center, the boulevard was more crowded with shopkeepers’ wares spilling out onto the pavement. Here were displays of abundance beyond my wildest imagining: vegetables of all colors arranged in symmetrical displays, pottery pieces in undreamed of numbers.

A shopkeeper screamed when he saw us, pulled his apron and gown up above his knees and ran for his door, slamming it. I could hear the bolts being shoved in place even as others began to run and scream as well. "Moors!" I heard them shouting.

My uncle grinned. "Their name for us. They're fearful of us now--it's an improvement over their usual arrogance! Come on, men. We've got to take what we want before the garrison wakes up!"

My uncle led the way into the heart of the marketplace: what a treasure trove! Rows of great amphorae of wine and oil, great sacks of wheat, fine cloths, rugs. As we helped ourselves, the men and women running from us became a crowd far larger than any I had seen. Food and cloth gave way to metalware: we loaded our packhorses with it, and then went on to the jewelry.

"Promised my queen and her daughters I'd bring them back some gold and silver," Micipsa explained to me, as he grabbed necklaces and bracelets and stuffed them into his saddlebag. He grinned at me. "And you, Zerco, you should carry off some as well--for the girl you'll wed before the summer's dawn. I've been negotiating with Chief Gildo on the other side of Timgad."

A girl? A wife! I stood with my mouth open. It was the first I'd heard of this! We Moors kept our women well-guarded--I hardly knew my uncle's daughters. The other maidens in the tribe, well I'd caught their glances, their grins, heard their suppressed titters, but if I dared approach too close they'd scatter, giggling, covering their faces with their broad sleeves. My uncle's casual comment hit me like a loose stone falling from a cliff.

For an instant, nothing made sense: the alien riches surrounding me, the high walls gleaming in the rising sun, the moans of the shopkeeper, hiding under a pile of rags beneath the tables. Before me was meaningless glitter and shine. I grabbed at it, stuffing necklaces, rings into my saddlebags, earrings, bracelets, gold chains, amulets--whatever my hand found.

Our men did the final loading of the pack animals, while five of us guarded them. I and one other held spears ready to throw. Hanno and Garamantes, my closest friends, held bowstrings taut, arrows ready. Micipsa held his drawn sword; it flashed in the bright sun.

We took two mules to carry even more. As the men loaded them with the oil and wine, my uncle looked edgy. "Hurry! The garrison's got to be on its way by now!"

That was when I first heard a strange, new sound: thrump, thrump, thrump. Thrump, thrump thrump. It was getting louder.

"The soldiers!" someone shouted.

The tramp of many feet in unison.

"They're close, only a few corners away!" shouted my Uncle. "Let's get going. Zerco, Hanno and Garamantes, guard our rear."

We all mounted. While our party moved quickly up the street, the three of us waited, Garamantes' and Hanno's horses on either side of mine, their faces set, their bows ready. I held my spear, unsure of what to do with it--was I supposed to charge the oncoming soldiers?

My heart pounded in my chest, I took short breaths, wanting more air. I heard the unseen mass of men approach.

They turned the corner. A street-wide rank. Shields and helmets glinted in the sun; they almost blinded me.

Hanno glanced back at our retreating band. He nodded to Garamantes. They both loosed arrows at the approaching troops, then nocked second arrows and shot again. One found its mark, a man falling in the first rank. I was amazed, horrified, to see the man behind him step over the fallen body and into his place, filling up the hole almost immediately.

At a shout from their captain, a man off to the side wearing a distinctive cloak, the whole mass paused. He surveyed us, then shouted again. They began to run towards us, ponderous, a many legged monster weighed down by its armor.

I readied my lance to charge.

“No!” Hanno was shaking his head. “No need for that, Chief’s son. You’d slow them down a little, but you’d end your days at the other end of their whips--if you lived to tell about it. The Chief’s out of sight. We can get out of here, too.”

His horse wheeled. Garamantes and mine followed. I was still back there, about to charge into those strange, hard faces, relieved that I wasn’t, leaning close to my horse’s neck, his mane whipping in my face, our horses’ hooves thundering down the stone street, the angry shouts of soldiers diminishing behind us. When we gained the flat, open country beyond the town, we caught up with my uncle and the rest of the band.

“Come on,” was all he said, but he was grinning as if his face was too small to contain his teeth. We all launched into a gallop. Soon we reached one of the steep draws that were the special, protected entrances to our own wild land.

Spring! We greet it with a great festival, a sacrifice to our fierce Goddess, in thanks that we have survived the lean months. In earlier, happier times, when we strode as masters over our own land, we would sacrifice a young man in the prime of life. Sometimes he would have been a volunteer, but more often he would have been a captive. Now that our young men were carried off by the many-legged Roman monster, we could afford no such extravagant sacrifices. Even the occasional captured Roman soldier was a precious pair of arms we couldn't squander. We offered sheep and goats instead. We would feast upon them after the Goddess and her attendant gods had partaken. They would eat the fatty pieces we threw into the fire, making black, sooty smoke as the slabs sizzled, turned crisp, then blackened into coals. Clear blue smoke was the sign that the gods were sated, and that now it was our turn. We feasted on roast lamb and kid, while drinking endless stone flagons of stolen Roman wine.

Sacrifice done, thanks given, we celebrated the fecundity of the earth. I had been too young to participate in previous years. When I was younger, I had gone off with my mother, the other women and children, and the old men. They took the herds to lower pastures, while the younger men and women celebrated the great rite of Spring. For the last few years I had been allowed to remain with my uncle, to watch the festivities, but I had been too young to take an active part.

This year, since I would soon be married, and was a chief's son, I took the most prominent role in our masked debauch: I was Bilmawn.

In early morning, women sewed me into fresh and smelly goatskins from the sacrifice of the day before. My companions lowered the skull of a great horned goat over

my head; it had a stick device to work its jaws. Sewn over my chest were two large cow bladders--my breasts. I tied a rope around my waist as a woman does with her dress. But sewn to the hide on my back, flapping between my bare legs, hung two large sacks, each weighted with a spherical stone. Between the sacks stuck out the blown-up skin of a goat's intestine.

My attendant demons shivered in the early morning cool, since they wore nothing but a liberal coating of ashes over oil. Only Hanno, as the god of death, was different. He was painted all in black. While several women made the last finishing touches to my costume, my companions ran up and down to keep warm in the little protected glade that was our dressing room,.

Finally, we were ready to begin the procession to the village threshing floor. As a final touch, Garamantes, one of my demons, poured ashes over my shoulders and back, so that I would trail smoke as I rushed out into the cleared space.

The god of death preceded me, running, roaring: he was Hanno no longer. His face arms, legs, and torso were all a shiny, greasy black. He growled and roared at the waiting villagers, slashing at them with a light wood stick. They surged away from him, laughing, shrieking. Older men jeered, trying to grab him; others watched at a safer distance. The unmarried girls grinned and giggled beside the nearest huts.

I made my entrance, working the mouth of the goat's head with the stick, wiggling my ass as if I were a woman who wanted a man's attention. I was a billow of smoke.

Boys tried to pelt me with pebbles and sticks, but my attending demons rushed at them, their sticks hissing in great threatening arcs.

Garamantes seized me from behind, and threw a rope around my goat's neck. I was to pull the "plow," a crooked tree root. He guided it, while I made a great show of pulling. Actually, he had to carry the plow before him being careful to keep the rope taut, but not pulling on the goat's neck: its weight would have pulled my costume apart. I was sweating, but I didn't care. I could feel the heat of girls' eyes; they were fixed on me.

We circled the threshing floor flanked by my demons, preceded by Death. The demons shouted and pushed at the villagers, poured ashes over them, and rained down blows with their light sticks. They grabbed one older unmarried man. It took three to hold him down. One demon poured ashes over his face and hair, a second pulled up his tunic, while a third shouted to a group of giggling women: "Hey, look! He's got something you'd like! Almost as big as Bilmawn's!"

The demon with the skin full of ashes chortled: "Grab it, girls, and it'll get even bigger!"

The women didn't look away as they would in normal times. They were doubled up with laughter.

I noticed one raven-haired girl with great brown eyes. She had been looking like all the rest, but then she glanced up and caught my eyes, through the mask. A long instant, her eyes wide and knowing. "I'll have you soon enough," I promised to myself, my ears roaring.

After I had paraded around the cleared space, the tree root behind me, Hanno led the demons out onto the floor. They worked their light sticks like scythes, harvesting the wheat. I mimed gathering the great bundles, then whacking them on the dusty ground.

Harvest done, the demons began to chant, "Make us food, Bilmawn!"

The villagers took up the chant. “Make us food, make us food, Oh, Bilmawn..”

I worked my goat’s jaws, nodding. I knew what I was supposed to do. I sat down by a small flat rock one of the demons had carried onto the floor. Another poured a small pile of ashes on it. I picked pebbles from the ground for mutton, and scattered them over the mound of ashes. Then, like any self-conscious woman, I picked up a stone that might pass for a Roman mirror, and, as if seeing my reflection, I mimed painting my face and eyes.

The meal was done: couscous and mutton. I picked up the flat rock, placed it precariously on my goat’s head and danced towards the crowd. They were shouting, “Feed us, Bilmawn! Feed us!”

Purposely, I tripped; the stone platter flew towards the crowd. I was proud to see it landing just right, spraying the squealing women with pebbles and ashes.

I scrambled, running towards the center of the village, my bare feet digging into the loose soil.

My ash-smearing demons raced after me, grabbed me, pulled me back towards the threshing floor. I was supposed to resist. I arched my back, and mimed pulling against them, laughing inside my mask.

I was jostled to the center of the threshing floor. The crowd and demons were shouting: “Where’s our food, Bilmawn? Where’s our feast?”

Hanno turned me around. He held up the tuber-like goat’s intestine, waving it at the crowd, shouting, “Here’s your food!” The crowd guffawed. “Or here!” He was pointing at Garamantes and the other ash-smearing demons; they had clutched at their

crotches, displaying themselves. Some were even thrusting them towards the giggling girls.

The large-eyed girl I'd marked before looked demure as she scanned my companions. Then her eyes again caught mine, behind the mask. Hers glowed. I felt hot, distended. I turned, wriggled my ass at her, shaking the goat's tube. The women started to call to me.

"Oh, Bilmawn, aren't you going to visit me?"

"No, me!"

"No, me!"

"I've got a soft bed, Bilmawn!"

All those lovely women. I sidled up to Hanno, still glistening in black, my goat's head turning this way and that as I marked the girls scattering towards their huts. The goat's head exaggerated my movements, and made it difficult to tell where Bilmawn was really looking. I was watching for the girl with the large, melting brown eyes. There! She smiled invitingly from her hut, the farthest from the threshing floor.

"Clear the way for me over there, Hanno," I murmured to him, gesturing with a covert hand.

He glanced at my hand, followed where it was pointing. I could see his eyes take in the object of my desires. He smirked. "Old Bilmawn's got his first target, hey!"

He nodded, then began to run around the circle, first away from her, to deceive the crowd, then towards her. At the moment the crowd least expected it, Hanno rushed at them, stick flailing, heading straight for her hut. I ran after him, roaring, hitting people that got too close with the hooves of the skins that clothed me.

When I arrived at the hut, Hanno was systematically tipping over pitchers of water, scattering clothes and throwing implements over the dirt floor. He was like a whirlwind, and he made loud farting sounds to punctuate his “Hah! Unh! Out you go!”

He met me at the doorway, smirked, his eyes catching mine. “I can keep them busy outside for a few minutes, at least.” He winked, and then was gone.

The girl was backed against the farthest wall, her eyes wide. Wide, but not with fear.

For just an instant, I wondered what to do. I backed towards her making my oversized sewed-on genitals jounce and jiggle before her. I had never been this close to a woman alone in her own hut.

She squealed with delight; she grabbed me between the legs--the real me. “I’ve got my Bilmawn by the balls!”

She tittered triumphantly and then let go.

I turned around, and lifted her skirt; she was wet, her thighs glistened with readiness as she spread her legs. I took her right there, plunging in, my “breasts” flapping about our shoulders.

She gasped. The borders of my being spilled over, I filled her with myself, a great soaring arc of everything I had, and then I was spent. I fell back on my knees and looked up. Her black triangle of hair glistened. Her eyes were closed.

Raw. Sore. More than hungover. Every woman had wanted Bilmawn. What an initiation into carnal pleasures! For five days and five long nights I had been Bilmawn. I had sought them out, they had waylaid me, I had even been captured--sweet captors!

The whole village had slept it off, and after all that wine--gallons, I think--I could hardly touch food for days.

Then everyday life took up its inexorable, numbing rhythm once again. The old men, the married women with children, came back with the herds. We again went out on patrols with my Uncle. But there was a difference, for me at least. In the village, behind every doorway, were women whose bodies had met with mine, whose eyes had flashed at my approach, whose knowing laughs had urged me on. Now, when I saw long hair falling over smooth brows, I remembered their beckoning glances, even though their eyes now focused on the ground, prim virgins once more.

My uncle grinned at my restlessness. "It's time, my boy! Take Hanno, Garamantes, and three others. You'll set off tomorrow early for the mountains beyond Timgad--the Romans call it Thamagudi. She awaits you there, Selene of the Nasomenes. She's a chief's daughter, worthy of your birth, and beautiful from what they say. Her father, Bocchus, is our ally, and your marriage will bind him closer to us."

I was ready! But, "You won't lead us?"

Micipsa put his hand on my shoulder. His eyes were kind as he looked into my face. "You're not very experienced, it's true, but you've got your father's grit. Don't worry about getting there. Garamantes comes from those mountains, and Hanno's our best warrior. They'll keep you out of trouble."

I will never forget the day we set off: April by the Roman reckoning, the height of spring as we descended from our mountains. Every ravine was green, alive with reds, purples, yellows, blues and pinks, masses of wildflowers. The air was heavy with fragrance, loud with bees pasturing with abandon.

We traversed higher slopes, keeping Roman settlements at a distance and to our north. We reasoned that, if we left them alone, they would let us be, as well. Our nomadic ways were tolerated, usually. There was even one place, Garamantes told me, where we would pass through two Roman checkpoints and they would allow us through. Many generations before, according to him, our people had agreed to abide by Roman limits on our movements in the area near Timgad, in return for being permitted to pasture our flocks on lowland fields in winter.

We passed through the checkpoints, pink-faced soldiers waving us through. We stopped at daybreak at the foot of the foothills to Bocchus's range, hobbling our horses. Our camp was protected by a wooded ravine just below us, or so it looked to me, but we were giddy with fatigue.

We had drunk no wine, but Garamantes was jovial, almost punchdrunk: "It won't be long, Zerco! I envy you. I've seen the girl--only from a proper distance, mind--but she's a beauty! First you're Bilmawn, and now you get Selene!"

"Bilmawn's only a five day wonder," Hanno laughed, "but you'll have Selene until she's old and fat!"

"How near is it, then?" I asked Garamantes. I was embarrassed by how eager I felt.

"You saw the mountain--the purple one--before we came down into these lowlands?"

I nodded. "The Great Erg, you said. Is that it?"

Garamantes nodded. "We're on the beginning of its climb. Maybe two days ride." His eyes were nearly closed. He was about to fall asleep on his feet.

“Or nights.” I yawned. Garamantes yawned in response.

Hanno looked from him to me, then nodded. “We’ve all got to sleep. I’ll try to keep awake for the first watch, although the Roman guard said security should be no problem for us up here. At least..”

I was lying down, pulling my cloak around me.

“..that’s what I *think* he was saying..”

If Hanno said any more, I didn’t hear it. I was sound asleep. Dangerously asleep.

Angry words. Curses in a foreign tongue, foreign voices! I tried to jump to my feet, grab my sword. A rope binding my legs pulled tight; I fell on my back.

Was this a nightmare? The Roman at the other end of the rope wore an amused grin, as if I were a funny animal. I glimpsed Garamantes and the others; they were netted, enmeshed like captured wild beasts, roaring and struggling in vain. Even as I fought to grab my sword, the Roman was winding the rope around me, pulling it tight. I couldn’t move!

Only Hanno was still free. He fought three of them, his short sword to their long lances. He slashed furiously; they tried to knock the sword from his hand. He fought back, hewing one spear to a stump, advancing on the others when I saw a fourth behind him with a net.

“Look out!” I shouted.

Too late. The net fell over him. My captor laughed at me.

Hanno could no longer use his sword, but still he had his dagger. He ripped at the net, then glanced up, saw the overwhelming odds, saw me all bound, and wailed with despair. "It's all my fault, Zerco! I fell asleep! Forgive me!"

I nodded, moaning, "Oh, Hanno--"

A Roman slashed at me.

Hanno pointed his dagger at his heart, rammed it in, blood spurting. He fell, sprawling full-length on his back, his chest awash in red.

The Roman holding his net shrugged at his companion. His face was lean, weathered, and unconcerned. He said something in their clipped tongue: it sounded, from its tone, as if he were saying, "Oh, well, we've got five, anyway."