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Attila

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1

STORM FROM THE EAST

Tuscany, early August 408

A bright dawn was breaking over the sun-baked plains beside the River Arno. Around the walls of the grim frontier town of Florentia, the exhausted remnants of Rhadagastus' barbarian army were awakening, to find themselves no longer surrounded by the implacable legionaries of Rome. Slowly, uncertainly, and with a defeated air, they began to break camp and make for the hills to the north.

On another hill to the south, commanding a fine view of the retreat, and surveying the scene with some satisfaction, sat two Roman officers on horseback, resplendent in breastplates of bronze and plumes of scarlet.

'Shall I give the order, sir?' said the younger of the two.

General Stilicho kept his gaze on the unfolding scene below. 'Thank you, Tribune, but I shall do it myself when good and ready.' Impertinent puppy, he thought, with your bought commission and your unscarred limbs.

From far below arose clouds of dust, partially obscuring the sight of the barbarians' great wooden wagons as they creaked and rolled out of the camp and made their way northwards. The two Roman officers on the hill could hear the crack of bullwhips and the cries of men as this motley and vagabond army of Vandals and Sueves, renegade Goths, Lombards and Franks, began its long retreat back beyond the Alpine passes to their tribal homelands.

Rome would survive their attentions a little longer yet.

Rhadagastus' ferocious horde of Germanic warriors had been united only in their lust for gold, and their fierce delight in destruction. They had cut a crimson swathe across half of Europe, from their homelands on the cold Baltic shores, or out on the vast

Scythian steppes, to the vineyards of Provence and the golden hills of Tuscany, until they eventually came to a halt at the city of Florentia. Once there, they besieged that sternly fortified colony of Rome on the banks of the Arno. But the great General Stilicho, as imperturbable as ever, rode north from Rome to meet them, with an army perhaps only a fifth the size of Rhadagastus' – but an army trained in the arts of siegecraft as well as war.

As is so often said, for every day that a Roman soldier wields a sword, he spends a hundred days wielding a shovel. No one digs a trench like a Roman soldier. And soon the besiegers of the city found themselves in turn besieged. The surrounding army, though fewer in number, had access to vital supplies from the nearby country, to food and water, fresh horses and even new weaponry. The surrounded army, however, forcibly enclosed in its camp under the heat of the Tuscan August sun, was in no better circumstances than Florentia itself. The trapped barbarians had no resources they could draw on, and slowly began to expire.

In desperation, the frustrated and stricken Germans threw themselves against the barriers that surrounded them, but to no avail. Their horses shied and whinnied, hooves cruelly pierced by the iron caltrops the Romans had scattered across the hard-baked ground, throwing their furious riders beneath the unyielding entrenchments and ramparts, where they were soon despatched by archers up on the embankment. Those who tried to attack their besiegers on foot found themselves having to descend into a ditch six feet in depth, and then struggle out the far side, an equal climb, and up against three lines of wicked sharpened staves. Behind them were lined the Roman spearmen with their long thrusting-javelins. It was an impossible barrier. Those barbarians not slain on the barricades returned to their tents and lay down in exhaustion and despair.

When Stilicho reckoned Rhadagastus had lost as much as a third of his forces, he gave the order for the Romans to break camp in the night and withdraw into the surrounding hills. And so now, as dawn broke, the baffled and exhausted northern tribes found themselves free to move off as well – homewards.

Nevertheless, once they were rolling and in thorough disorder, it would be good to send in the new auxiliaries and see what they could do. Stilicho took no fine pleasure in seeing men cut down on a battlefield – unlike some generals he could mention. But the vast and undisciplined rabble below, which that troublesome warlord

Rhadagastus had pulled together for the summer campaigning season, remained a threat to Rome's northern borders, even in defeat. A final harrying attack from these new mounted troops, however lightweight, would certainly do no harm.

At last, with the barbarian army chaotically strung out across the plain, and its vanguard nudging into the foothills to the north, General Stilicho gave the nod.

'Send them in,' he said.

His tribune relayed the signal down the line, and only moments later Stilicho saw with some surprise that the auxiliaries had already started their gallop.

Not that he expected much from them. They were small men, these new warriors from the east, and lightly armed. They favoured their neat bows and arrows over all other weapons, and even rode into battle with lassos – as if about to ride down a bunch of sleepy-eyed heifers! Who ever won a battle with mere rope? And Rhadagastus' warriors, even in defeat, were no sleepy-eyed heifers.

As well as being small and lightly armed, these horsemen fought without armour, naked to the waist, with only a fine coating of dust over their coppery, leathery skins for protection. They would do little damage to the retreating army, it was clear, but it would be interesting to see them in action, all the same. No Roman had yet seen them fight, although many had heard vainglorious and unlikely reports of their prowess at arms. They were said to move fast on their shaggy little steppe ponies, so perhaps some use could be found for them in future in the imperial courier service . . . With luck, they might even manage to ride down Rhadagastus himself, and bring him in as a captive. It was a long bowshot, but worth a try.

Well, reports of their impressive turn of speed, at any rate, had not been exaggerated.

The horsemen came thundering out from a shallow valley to the east, and made straight for the stricken column of retreating barbarians. Good enough tactics: the sun behind them, and straight in their enemies' eyes. Stilicho was too far away to see the expressions on the faces of Rhadagastus' men, of course, but the way the column slowed, and jostled, and the air filled with panicked cries, and then the heavy wagons lurched desperately forwards again, trying to make for the safety of the rough ground and the hills before the furious charge of the eastern horsemen

could hit them – such things told him Rhadagastus' warriors weren't smiling.

The horsemen's thunderous charge drummed up a fine dust from the sun-baked late-summer plains, and Stilicho and his tribune strained to see. Then something darkened the air between them. At first they could barely comprehend.

'Is that . . . Is that what I think it is, sir?'

Stilicho was dumbfounded. It was indeed what it seemed. The very air was dark with them. An unimaginable storm of arrows.

He had heard that these people were good on horseback; and he had heard good things of their unprepossessing little bows. But nothing had prepared him for this.

The arrows fell in an endless rain, like murderous stinging insects, upon Rhadagastus' outflanked column, and the stricken Germans began to grind to a halt, their path blocked by the piled-up corpses of their own men. Then the horsemen, the fury of their charge undiminished even after covering a mile or more of hard, sunbaked ground – long after a troop of Roman cavalry would have begun to slacken and tire – scythed into the aghast and petrified column.

Both Stilicho and his tribune had their fists bunched up on the pommels of their saddles, pushing themselves up and straining to see.

'In the Name of Light,' murmured the general.

'Have you ever seen anything like it, sir?' said the tribune.

The horsemen cut through the column in seconds, then, with unbelievable dexterity, wheeled round and cut in again from the other side. Rhadagastus' warriors, even after their weeks of starvation and sickness under the walls of Florentia, were now trying to establish some kind of formation and repel the attack. These tall, blond spearmen, these fierce and skilful swordsmen, fought back with the ferocity of the doomed. But the ferocity of their attackers was greater. Nearer to where they sat their horses, the two Roman officers could see breakaway groups of mounted auxiliaries wheeling and turning about as if with pure delight, effortlessly slaughtering the helpless, milling Germans. And they also saw the deadly effect of the easterners' lassos. Any barbarian who tried to mount up and ride was instantly brought down again by the whistle and lash of the cruel noose, cast with terrible, casual accuracy. The victim fell in a tangle of reins and limbs, and was quickly despatched where he lay.

Stilicho watched with amazement as the horsemen, even up close, long after Roman cavalry would have drawn their long-swords, continued to use their short bows and arrows. He could now see, as the fighting spread out in disorder below them, why their fighting skill was so renowned. He watched a single horseman notch an arrow to his bow, fire it into the back of a fleeing German, and snatch another arrow from his quiver as he swung round on his horse's bare back. He notched it, leant down at an incredible angle to take cover alongside the body of his mount, holding on with his thigh muscles alone, then sprang back up and loosed another arrow almost into the face of a German running at him with axe swinging. The arrow punched straight through and came out of the back of the axeman's head in a spew of blood and brain. The horseman had notched another arrow to his bow and galloped on before the warrior hit the ground.

Galloped! The entire encounter had been executed, before Stilicho's disbelieving eyes, at full gallop. And there was no sign of its ferocity abating.

'Name of Light,' he breathed again.

Within minutes, the plain was strewn with barbarian dead and dying. The eastern horsemen at last slowed their mounts to a walk as they patrolled the bloody field, despatching the last of the fallen with occasional arrows or spearthrusts. None of them dismounted. The dust began to settle. The sun still slanted in low from the east and illuminated the scene in a gentle golden glow. Only minutes had passed since dawn broke.

The general and his tribune at last turned and looked at each other. Neither said a word. Neither could think of a word to say. They spurred their horses forward and rode on down the hill to salute their new auxiliaries.

Under a hastily erected awning at the edge of the battlefield, Stilicho settled his powerful frame awkwardly on a tottering camp-stool and prepared to receive the warlord of the auxiliary horsemen. Uldin, he was called. 'King Uldin', he styled himself.

Before long he appeared, as small and unprepossessing as his people's horses or bows. But within that odd, short, bow-legged frame, the same wiry, inexhaustible strength.

Stilicho did not rise, but nodded courteously. 'It was good work that you did today.'

'It is good work that we do every day.'

Stilicho smiled. 'But you have not brought in Rhadagastus?'

Now Uldin smiled. His curious, slanted eyes glittered, but not with mirth. He clicked his fingers, and one of his men stepped up close behind him.

'Here,' said Uldin. 'Here he is.'

The warrior moved forward and dropped a dark, sodden sack at Stilicho's feet.

The general grunted and plucked open the sack. He had seen enough of the raw realities of battle in his thirty years of soldiering to be undismayed by the sight of severed heads and limbs. All the same, the dismembered remains of Rhadagastus – his hands trailing purple sinews from their ragged wrists, his blood-spattered face and splayed eyes staring back up at him out of the gloom of the sack – slowed his heart for a moment or two.

So this was the great Germanic warlord who had promised to slaughter two million Roman citizens and hang every senator from the eaves of the Senate House. Who had said he'd leave the senators' corpses hanging there from the Senate House to be picked clean by the crows, then the bare skeletons would clang together like bone bells in the wind – the man had been a poet.

A little less wordy now, old friend? thought Stilicho.

When he looked up, he said, 'My orders were for Rhadagastus to be taken alive.'

Uldin remained expressionless. 'That is not our way.'

'No, it is the Roman way.'

'Do you give King Uldin orders, soldier?'

Stilicho hesitated. He knew diplomacy was not his strong point. Soldiers said what they thought. Diplomats said what others wanted to hear. But for now he must try to . . . Besides, you should always tread warily with a man who refers to himself in the third person.

Uldin took advantage of the general's hesitancy. 'Remember,' he said softly, stroking the thin, grey wisp of beard that barely covered his chin, 'the Huns are your allies, not your slaves. And alliances, like bread, can be broken.'

Stilicho nodded. He would also remember, for the rest of his life, the way the Huns fought. God help us, he thought, if they should ever . . .

'When we ride into Rome in triumph, later this month,' he said, 'you and your warriors will ride with us.'

Uldin relaxed a little. 'So we will,' he said.

With that, he turned on his heel and walked out into the sunshine.