

Attila the Valley Girl  
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The emperor arrived with all pomp and ceremony. His carriage was the most ornate on the continent, and pulled by gorgeous, all-white steeds. Trumpeters played.

The quaestor met his overlord in the sprawling courtyard. The emperor Valentinian III emerged from the pristine white carriage. The quaestor said expansively, “My lord Caesar, first citizen of the empire, lord of all Euro—”

The emperor cut him off with a wave of the hand. “Have a bath drawn. I want three of your best slave girls to wipe me down. For the nonce, vino. Tuscan hills, 410s or older – but not a 407. For the love of Jupiter, do not poor me a god-rotting 407 Bellacatius.”

The quaestor was startled. The emperor had just cut off his warm welcome. The trumpeters had stopped. Caesar Valentinian was already striding for the door. The quaestor blinked. This was the first time he’d ever been in the same town as his overlord. He’d shaven, and oiled his hair. He’d had a new toga woven from the finest materials. He’d had his horses brushed and reshod. And the man didn’t even look at him, just demanded a bath and some vino.

Quickly, the quaestor snapped to it and began barking orders. Bath to be drawn, slaves ready, and the finest drink served in the finest chalice for their lord Caesar. All this he dictated as the young Valentinian climbed the steps of the grand inn.

The emperor’s vast retinue funnelled into the porte-cochère. The empress and their young daughter, and a coterie of court women, maidservants, wet nurses and hangers-on. Legionaries and praetors and the best soldiers in the empire. Senators and legati.

General Flavius Aetius, the emperor’s right-hand man, stepped up to the quaestor, whispered, “He’s in a bad mood. This impending summit with the barbarians is not looking good.”

The quaestor blanched. There were rumours about the barbarians. They had already wreaked havoc in the East, on Thrace and Dalmatia, and marched their horses to the very gates of Constantinople. Their Eastern brethren did not disclose the full details of the treaty they’d signed, but it was alleged that they were sending ox cart-loads of gold out of their treasury every year.

Aetius himself, the chief military leader in the realm, the magister militum, had squired with the barbarians, sent up there as a hostage when he was young. He knew how ruthless they could be.

The quaestor was a forty-two-year-old Roman Spaniard named Quintus Decidian. His family was of noble lineage. He had grown up in Spain and Africa, and spent part of his youth in the imperial city itself. His father had served as lieutenant-governor of Africa. Quintus had proven himself in battle against both the Visigoths and the Vandals.

He had no pretensions as to why he’d been chosen to host this summit. The barbarian king wanted to meet in the capital of Ravenna, or even the imperial city for which the empire had been named. The emperor couldn’t allow a barbarian strongman into Italy itself, but neither did he fancy travelling to the northern reaches of far-flung Gaul. Monoecus was a suitable compromise everyone could live with.

And the fact that the Decidian family had financed the building of this elaborate gambling house was a cherry atop the cake. Caesar Valentinian loved to gamble, and to drink, and to watch the burlesque shows put

on at such establishments.

The Monteus Carleus Inn and Gambling House was tremendous, ornately designed and gaudily painted. It was built in the Alpine foothills, the sea to the south, towering mountains rising to the north. Quintus had been a vocal opponent of his father's plan to finance such an establishment, but now that it was up and running, it did bring in revenue. The Decidian family vineyards surrounded the resort, manicured rows of grape trees stretching for miles into the hills. In the far back was vast pasturage for the quaestor's horses, numbering some one hundred in sum.

More noble guests arrived throughout the course of the day. Theodoric, king of the Visigoths, arrived on horseback with two of his sons. Quintus gave the nobles the same warmth in welcome as he did to the emperor and various senators, though his wife declined to be there with him. Huneric, prince of the Vandals, rode in on a carriage that rivalled the emperor's. The Vandal prince was betrothed to Caesar Valentinian's noble daughter, who at this point was only eleven years of age. Flavius Ardabur Aspar, magister militum of the East appeared just after lunch with a small retinue. General Aspar was here representing Caesar Valentinian's co-ruler in Constantinople. There was nothing that required Constantinople to approve of any treaties or arrangements Ravenna made with the barbarians, yet the East knew of the menace that was the savages beyond the Danube, and wanted to ensure their western brethren were properly advised.

That evening, the quaestor was exhausted. Shuffling to his bed, he disrobed and climbed in next to his wife, Octavia. The quaestor's own sleeping quarters had been turned over to the emperor, who was also employing many of Quintus' slaves. Quintus and his wife were sleeping in an outbuilding, overlooking the stables.

"The Gothic swine have requested a polo match tomorrow," Octavia said while she read some papyrus scrolls. "Against Lord Aetius and some of his centurions."

"Don't call them 'swine', dear," said Quintus, disliking her tone.

"They killed your brother, Quintus."

Quintus sighed. That had been twenty-five years before, a lifetime ago. Goth and Roman were allied now, a united front against a more barbaric foe.

"Let it go, Octavia," he chided softly. "He's in the ground. And he would have squandered the family wealth a dozen times over if he'd lived, and the emperor would be hosting this summit somewhere else."

Octavia flipped a few scrolls, not saying anything for a time. Abruptly, she said, "The princess arrived today."

Quintus looked up. He had not heard of this. He should have greeted her at the main entrance. "Why—"

"You were fetching Caesar a bottle of vino," she replied. "If ever there was an excuse to miss the Augusta's arrival, tending to the emperor is surely it. Relax, dear, I saw her settled. She requested not to stay under the same roof as her brother, so I put her in the east villa."

Quintus let out a breath. He'd have to make a point to introduce himself tomorrow. He snapped his fingers, reflexively calling for a slave to make a note. Then he remembered that almost every slave on the estate had been reassigned to deal with their guests. He'd have to remember.

"What's she like?" he asked.

"They say she's a far better politician than her brother, not to speak ill of our glorious Lord Caesar." Octavia

folded the papyrus. “The first thing she asked was whether or not her betrothed had arrived.”

Which one? Quintus thought. There are two men to whom she’s been promised.

“What did you tell her?”

“I simply said not yet. I assumed she wasn’t referring to Senator Herculanus, who was in a dice room on the second floor at the time. But I didn’t mention the barbarian’s name.”

“Good,” said Quintus. “Sending her ring to the goat-sodding king of the Huns. Not to speak ill of our illustrious princess, but what was she thinking?”

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On the fourth day, the barbarian embassy arrived. There were no carriages, no litters, no chariots. The horses chosen to bear the kings from beyond the Danube were picked for their swiftness on the open plain rather than their coats or the lusciousness of their manes. Every nobleman, if they could be called that, rode in on their own mount, perched in the saddle.

There was Aybars, great rider and uncle to the king, with his cat-like face. There were chiefs of the Suebi and the Burgundians and the Gepids. There were the women of the court, all Saxones or Frisii, with yellow-blond hair and rouge lips. There were hangers-on and merchants and shepherds.

And there he was: the barbarian at the gates, the Scourge of God, the greatest enemy the civilized world had known since Hannibal marched his elephants across the Alps. King Attila, ruthless emperor of the Hunnish menace.

He was dressed all in leather – hard riding clothes, crudely stitched together. The leather was hot pink, vibrant, gaudy. His ears were pierced. His hair was silver-blond, like a barbarian pirate from the north of Europa. It hung down to his middle back, save the left side of the head, which was shorn close, revealing dark roots. His moustache was long and spindly, drooping far down off his upper lip to below the chin, braided and bound. He must have been cultivating that ’stache since his youth. The king’s horse was electrifyingly red, as though it were on fire, with a long and flowing mane and tail of ash white. The beast boldly stood apart from the rest of his retinue’s mounts, a mix of black and brown and grey.

And on the king’s hip hung a sword, the hilt jutting up from his belt. Quintus had heard the legends. He knew it was probably propaganda, a story cooked up by Attila’s courtiers, but still he wondered, was that it? The Sword of Mars? The legendary blade blessed by the war god himself, the bearer of which was physically invincible and blessed by Elysium itself in conflict? As far as Quintus knew, King Attila had never been beaten, either in single combat, or on a raid, or at war – all three of these things being synonymous in Hunnish. Was he, perchance, blessed by Mars himself?

Quintus stepped up to the king, who was dismounting from his horse. The rider Aybars put himself in the quaestor’s path. Showing due respect, Quintus saluted. He proclaimed, “Lord Aybars, I am Quintus Decidian, Quaestor of Provincia Gallia Narbonensis—”

“The king would like to speak to his brother,” purred Aybars. “Greet the emperor properly.”

Right from the start they were saying ‘brother’. That’s a smart tactic, thought Quintus. Press the claim early, and stridently.

Caesar Valentinian had not deigned to be here to greet his... his would-be brother. That was the emperor's own power play.

Quintus said, "My lord, the emperor regrets he couldn't be here himself. He is otherwise disposed at the moment. But I shall show you to your rooms and have your horses tended to, and this evening, Caesar shall grant you an audience."

He'd been told to say these words.

Behind the rider, the pink-clad king huffed. Aybars quickly said, "Well, the king's betrothed, then. We shall see her at once."

Quintus spoke calmly and assuredly. "Caesar believes he should present the lady to his highness."

Without dignifying the quaestor, King Attila took off in a stride, brushing straight past him into the Inn and Gambling House. Aybars and many of the court retinue followed.

Quintus sputtered. He was meant to show the Huns to their rooms and have them fed, not to have them wander the grounds of their own accord. Tensions were high here; the Goths were likely to unsheathe blades if they came across Huns in the halls of the gambling house, soldiers serving with General Aspar had probably seen villages annihilated in Dalmatia and wouldn't be too happy to see goat-sodding barbarians sipping vino and playing at dice. Quintus looked to his wife, who glared back urgently.

Quickly, he followed the Huns. "Uh, my lords, if you'll please follow me, I shall have you settled. My wife, the Lady Octavia, shall see to your women. Of course we have a sumptuous feast being prepared in your rooms. Bread and barley, and roast pheasant, and succulent pork ribs. Oh, and the finest vino is being chilled on Alpine ice. And, uh, I'm told Hunnish cuisine favours alcoholic mare's milk. We have prepared many bottles for you. You will, I hope, grant leniency to our vinomakers; I'm afraid this is a novelty for them, but I brought in the greatest experts to get the process just right..."

Attila the Hun, blonde, flowing hair, and garish riding gear, traipsed blindly through the gambling house. He strode confidently through the ornate halls, passing one arched doorway after another. The businessmen and slave owners of Monoecus were engaged in various dice games, antoniniani and solidi passing quickly from one side of the table to the other. Young female slaves carried huge silver trays of tankards and vino bottles. Opulent paintings adorned the walls. Retired centurions stood guard, securing the vast wealth on display.

Rounding a corner, the Huns came to a marble staircase. They climbed it easily.

"Uh, my lord... your majesty..." sputtered Quintus, "If you and your party would like to try your hand at games of chance, I shall show you to a private gaming room. And, of course, as guests of me and my wife, we have a stipend of one hundred solidi – gratis, of course."

The barbarians marched on until they found a private room. The emperor's praetorian guard stood at attention outside the closed door. When the Huns approached, the two men stepped forward aggressively. The older Hun, Aybars, said to them, "How dare you bar the way. Do you know who this is?"

This was spiralling out of control. Quintus did not want a confrontation. He certainly did not want blades drawn when Caesar was on the other side of the door.

Panicking, he made an executive decision. Facing the praetorian guardsmen, he said, "This is the King of the Hunnish Empire. He wishes to greet our esteemed lord Caesar, and pay him the honour of greeting him."

Quintus shot a glance to the Huns, signalling to them this was an introductory meeting only, and they were being given but minutes. King Attila acknowledged nothing of the glance, but Aybars nodded almost imperceptibly.

The praetorian guardsmen stepped back. One of them opened the door.

Inside was a grand table. The emperor, in his crumpled purple toga, sat with his back to the door. A young maiden stood opposite him, a bronze cup with four dice inside in her hand. Several chalices were strewn across the table, some lying in their sides. Drops of vino were everywhere. The emperor's hair was ruffled.

King Attila sidled up to the table. Caesar Valentinian turned and eyed the barbarian menace.

Attila flamboyantly proclaimed, "Broseph Valentinian!"

His voice was high. It also sounded strained, as though it were being stretched like a length of cloth.

"It's me, girl! Your fave emperor beyond the Danuuube!"

The emperor stared back at the ostentatious marauder in disbelief.

"I'm so excited! Can you believe your sister and I are getting marrieeeed?"

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That evening, the entire upper floor of the estate was filled with the furious ravings of Caesar Valentinian. Dinnerware was thrown against the walls. Bottles of vino were smashed. A chair was thrown from the balcony, where it was reduced to splinters on the cobblestone below.

Quintus was spared his sovereign's ire, though he could hear it through the walls. Instead, the emperor was growling at General Aetius, as well as Senator Flavius Bassus Herculanus, who'd accompanied Caesar from Ravenna. The latter was supposed to be the princess' betrothed, an arrangement made at the behest of the emperor. The man was grey-haired, mealy-mouthed, and had no ambitions beyond living off his family's substantial wealth. Quintus had been introduced to the man a few years ago at his family estate in eastern Italy, and had forgotten the man's name as soon as he'd saluted.

"A daughter of Rome will never marry barbarian swine!" bellowed the emperor through the door.

"Lord Quaestor," came a voice.

Quintus turned to see the woman in question, the Augusta, Justa Grata Honoria.

He bolted from the bench, stood upright, saluted with an almost violent jerk of his arm.

Princess Honoria was dressed in all black, sleeves that went down and formed fingerless gloves on her hands. She was a year older than her brother. Her charcoal makeup was heavy, particularly around the eyes, where she or her chambermaid had painted sweeping black strokes, as though she wore a mask. Her lips, too, were painted black. Her stola was form-fitting and hung low on her neckline, a large jewel on a necklace drawing attention to her cleavage. And her hair was shorn nearly to the scalp. She looked almost ghoulish. Of course, Quintus didn't say anything of the sort to her.

“At ease, Lord Quaestor. My brother may be a buffoon and a blaggard, but not all of the royal family are such contemptible cunni.”

Quintus blinked. Had the Augusta just said such a vile word? It was so casual, so nonchalant – as though she were commenting on the palatability of a medium-grade vino.

“Come, walk with me,” said Honoria.

She turned and sauntered off.

Quintus tried not to think about the court gossip surrounding the Augusta. Vile slander was muttered not just in taverns and port towns, but was whispered in the private estates of noblemen. Indeed, on his visit to the estates of Senator Herculanus two years before, Quintus had heard salacious talk of the emperor’s voluptuous sister. She had a papilla pierced like a bawdy performer in a Constantinople whorehouse. She was once caught in attendance of a bawdy show wherein one meretrix was defiled by two dozen men in quick succession. She once drank so much vino in a single seventy-two hour period that she was sweating thick purple drops out her pores in successive days. She’d had meretrices of both sexes brought back to her villa. Like Cleopatra, she had her maidservants hollow out a gourd and stuff it with wasps, then shake it to anger the insects and get them buzzing, and hold the fruit to herself to receive pleasure. She once lost a replica phallus inside herself.

She led him down a flight of stairs. Here, the Monteus Carleus opened to a terrace overlooking the Mediterranean. Twilight was upon Monoecus. Unseen waves battered the shore down the cobblestone road at the bottom of the hill. Smoke wafted in from the nearby town.

One of the Augusta’s female slaves was waiting for her lady with a chilled bottle of vino. Wordlessly, the maiden popped the cork, and poured two chalices.

Augusta Honoria took one for herself, foisted the other upon Quintus. “To my impending nuptials,” she said. Then she guzzled the entire chalice in one gulp.

Quintus did not drink. He could not toast something the emperor was dead set against. And, by the vitriol which could still be heard from the balcony above, the emperor would send his sister to a convent in Constantinople rather than see her wed to the blonde barbarian king.

Honoria belched loudly and set her chalice down. The slave rapidly poured again.

“Come now, Quaestor Decidian. Drink. This vino comes from Asia Minor, it’s quite good. I *will*, after all, be wed – to my beloved, or that flatulence of a senator my brother wishes to pawn me off onto.”

There was no denying that. So, when the Augusta tipped her chalice once more, Quintus joined her, and tasted from his own.

Honoria set her chalice down. With a smirk on her face, she coyly, determinedly asked, “Why have I not yet been escorted to see my betrothed?”

Quintus nearly choked.

Because your ‘betrothed’ is a goat-sodding barbarian dressed in hot pink and threatening to cleave the empire in twain. Your actual betrothed is an upstanding senator currently having chairs flung at him in the imperial suite. And your little stunt is risking the downfall of civilization and a thousand years of continent-wide

Barbaricum.

He held his tongue. He could not say that to a princess, even one as impudent as her. He could be crucified, or exiled to the water-bearing service of some ambassador to the Visigothic court in Aquitaine.

“Most serene Augusta,” he began smoothly, “you know as well as I that negotiations should be conducted between King Attila and the emperor himself before—”

“Before the bride herself gets to weigh in?”

You already have weighed in, Quintus thought scornfully.

Honorio continued, “Perhaps that’s the problem. Perhaps I’m tired of being merely the ‘serene’ Augusta, rather than the glorious or esteemed or audacious.”

You certainly are audacious.

“Come, Lord Quaestor, let us play a game of chance.”

“Oh, no, my lady, I’m afraid I am not a gambler—”

“One game,” she insisted, heading for the terrace door and the gaming room beyond.

Quintus reluctantly followed her.

“I’ve been told a lady shouldn’t play for gold, so let’s keep solidi out of it. We’ll keep it simple. If I win, you march King Attila to my chambers as readily as you marched him to Caesar’s gaming room.”

Quintus felt his heart stop. There was no chance on Earth that he could do that.

Augusta Honorio threw the dice.

“My lady, I cannot agree—”

“You’re going to Celt on a bet after seeing my throw? Come now, Lord Quaestor.”

“I will not do it,” he stated adamantly.

“Look, I have but two sixes. If you can best my sum, the hand is won.”

“Under no circumstances will I deliver a noblewoman to the bed of a barbarian—”

“That noblewoman will soon be that barbarian’s wife, and this house, along with everything in Gaul shall be his new fief. *My* new fief.”

“Your brother is the right and proper Lord Caesar of all Europa—”

Honorio smirked devilishly. She held the dice in her hand. “Lord Quaestor, throw your turn, or I shall have the dealer throw on your behalf.”

His face red, nostrils flaring, Quintus abruptly turned on his heels and began to march off without dignifying

her. He took three steps when he heard her voice.

“Fortuna is with you, Lord Quaestor. You rolled a perfect Venus.”

He paused in his stride. Let out his breath, ever so slightly. Suddenly, Honoria was on her feet, at his side. She placed a gloved hand on his shoulder, whispered gently in his ear. “Next time, my dear. Next time Fortuna shall favour me, and I shall be with my beloved, and he shall render me too weak-legged to walk the following day.”

Once more, Quintus was shocked. No one else had heard it. She pecked him gently on the cheek, then strode off.

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Quintus rested heavily on the bar. It had been a hell of a day. The sun had set hours ago, and still the paperwork was building in his office. He’d gone non-stop all day answering queries, settling debts, putting out fires, reallocating people, catering to three foreign parties.

The bar was exquisite mahogany, in the central area between gaming rooms. It was stocked with every vintage of vino one could name, plus barley beer, whiskey and something called ginnus from Britannia, and rummix from the sugarcane islands off Spain. The man working the bar, seeing his overlord, came rushing over. The quaestor never came down to such a vulgar establishment as this, so it must be important.

“Something red and Dalmatian,” Quintus groaned.

The man working the bar rushed to a vino rack.

“Wait. Make it a rummix. Let’s see what the fuss is about.”

Chipping away at some Alpine ice, the bartender filled a tumbler glass with a few fingers worth of the dark liquid and deposited it in front of Quintus.

“There you are,” came a voice.

Quintus turned. It was the proprietor of his theatre.

Down the cobblestone way near the docks and the Decidian estate-owned warehouses along the Mediterranean shore was an entertainment venue that fell under the umbrella of Quintus’ business interests. It was the Mischievous Meretrix Burlesque Theatre, a bawdy joint which sold cheap barley beer, while an all-female cast acted out dance or theatre numbers, replete with all manner of nudity and double entendre. Technically under his name, Quintus had long considered shutting it down, but it did bring in revenue. Indeed, he’d met with this madam just the week before, where she’d shown up with receipts, showing the vast sums inn guests spent there.

“I’ve been looking for you for over an hour,” said the madam.

“That’s the idea,” Quintus groaned. “I hide out down here, no one can bother me.”

Ignoring the comment, she grabbed a stool and sat. Her shoulder bore a jagged tattoo, marking her as a one-time meretrix and low-class pleb. “We have a problem.”



"We don't have anything," grunted Quintus, sipping the rummix. "You run the bawdy house. It's yours. I just see the receipts."

"Well, the receipts are not coming in. You need to collect a debt."

"Get one of the enforcers to... do his thing."

Quintus didn't like to think or know about their methods. That was low-class chicanery; he ran an upstanding establishment here atop the hill, at the Monteus Carleus.

"Can't go breaking a prince's legs," she replied nonchalantly.

Quintus nearly spat out the rummix. Swallowing the harsh beverage, he said, "A prince?"

"A certain VIP from Carthage. He's seen every show this week, he's staying in a room upstairs, and he brings a different starlet up to his quarters after every—"

Quintus held up a hand. "Has a room? Prince Huneric has a room? I gave him quarters here. Lavish apartments. They're being cleaned daily, the toiletries replaced, fresh lemon water, vino on ice. And he's staying in some cheap bordello?"

"He's a man about town," the madam said with a shrug. "He's on vacation, he wants to live a little."

"He's engaged to Caesar's daughter!"

"They won't wed for a number of years," she said matter-of-factly.

"And his phallus will be gangrenous and half rotted off by the time he comes to the marital bed."

"Come now, you profane my girls. They're not poxxed... mostly."

Quintus sighed with half a growl. "How much does he owe?"

She produced a piece of papyrus. "One thousand, two hundred and twenty-seven solidi."

"One thousand—" Quintus exploded. Even with rampant inflation, the sum was absurd. Was he lining his bed with every whore in the place twice daily?

"He had certain special requests—"

Quintus held up a hand, cutting her off. He took the rummix, shot it back. It burned mercilessly on his throat, and he entered a paroxysm of coughing.

"I'll deal with it," he said at last.

"My girls deserve to be paid. The debauched things that they've agreed to... they want compensatio—"

*"I'll deal with it."*

She tucked the papyrus back into her stola. "I'll tell the girls they're back open for business tonight."

He should snap, bark at her to no one connected to the royal family should set foot in her place. But he knew couldn't go knocking on that door. For all he knew, Caesar Valentinian himself could be down there nightly. Or his sister. And Quintus didn't need to know about the amorous proclivities of General Aetius, or King Theodoric's sons—

Or, heaven forbid, the blonde barbarian himself.

He snapped his fingers, wanting more rummix. His glass was refilled and he shot it back.

Then he marched down towards the east wing, past a slew of gaming rooms. He rounded a corner, and a young slave girl ran directly into him. She bounced off of him and tumbled to the floor.

“Oh, most humble apologies, Dominus,” she babbled, unable to meet his eyes.

Quintus knew the girl. She was quiet and dutiful. Seventeen or so years old. She was in the service of his daughter, Aemilia. In fact, the girls were so close that this one regularly called Aemilia by her first name, or simply as Aemy, rather than the proper Domina. He'd have to speak to Aemilia about that one of these days.

For this summit, the slave girl had been reassigned, as had almost all of Quintus' slaves. She was... he'd have to check with his wife, but he was pretty sure she'd been assigned to the Augusta's service.

“No, that's quite all right. No harm done. You're not injured, are you?”

He went to help the girl up. Then he saw a folded piece of papyrus tucked into the girl's tunic. It fell loose as she came to her feet, and he snatched it up.

“Don't,” the girl spat, before remembering her place and hanging her head in silence.

Quintus, curious now, unfolded the papyrus.

It was a drawing, probably sketched by this slave girl. It was the Augusta, Lady Honoria, bent over, nude, her gluteus on display, huge in the page. Everything down the cleft of her backside and betwixt her thighs was visible. From above an arched back, the Augusta's head peaked out, looking backwards, her face displaying a cutesy 'oops' face, like she'd been caught coming out of the bath.

The slave girl mumbled, “Domina did not wish that seen by anyone save her beloved Tilly.”

“Tilly?” scoffed Quintus. His mind was reeling. “The Augusta is sending sketches of her backside of the barbarian king?”

“It is flirtation, Dominus.”

That meretrix! That wretched whelp! She's having slaves sketch her backside to solicit herself to Rome's greatest foe? And this is happening here, under his roof? Whilst Caesar Valentinian is trying to wed her off to a senator in good standing and save the empire?

Quintus was suddenly apoplectic with rage. Barely containing it, he breathed in once, then again. Deep breaths.

“Dominus?” the slave girl asked.

Crumpling the papyrus, he chucked it into a nearby brazier, signalling for a legionary at the end of the hall. The man came readily marching up to Quintus. The slave girl was now trembling.

Quintus said to the girl, "You'll be in the fields for a month. Avoid anyone above the status of peasant like the plague."

"Dominus?" she whispered.

To the legionary, he said, "Ensure the records reflect she received fifteen lashes."

The girl whimpered.

"The records?" asked the legionary.

"Aye, the records," retorted Quintus. Then he enunciated. "The *records*."

"Aye, Quaestor!" barked the man, who seized the girl by the elbow and pulled her away.

Quintus rubbed his temples as he slowly exhaled.

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"Seriously," said King Theodoric, "you keep that bastard away from me, or I'll cut his damned face off and ship him, bloody and scarred, back across the Mediterranean."

"It will be done," insisted Quintus, standing at the Goth's door.

King Theodoric and Prince Huneric hated each other, the former especially despising the latter. Only the threat of the Huns, common enemy to both peoples, got them to temporarily set aside their vicious hostilities and attend this international summit.

Quintus had been doing everything in his power to keep them separated from each other. He had them occupying rooms at complete opposite ends of the inn, on separate floors, had slaves assigned to each of their services who were in covert contact with their counterparts and thus could coordinate to keep them separated, had multiple breakfasts, lunches and dinners prepared each day so that the Gothic party and the Vandalic party would never see each other, and set aside different gaming rooms for each of them. Luckily, Prince Huneric seemed quite fond of dice, so he spent much of his free time in a private room, not unlike Caesar Valentinian, and therefore away from his Gothic counterpart.

Caesar had yet to organize a meeting with the Huns. It had been many days. Quintus had his staff and his slaves running ragged, and yet Caesar did nothing to speed things along. More than once, King Attila had asked the quaestor what was on the agenda for this summit, and Quintus had to sputter and stammer and lie through his teeth, guessing at when Caesar might actually deign to begin negotiations.

"If there's anything else I can do for you, your grace..." Quintus said to King Theodoric. He was thinking of his brother while staring into the curly beard of the older man.

"I'm quite all right. By the way, lovely place you've got here. I might do a stroll through your vineyards later."

"Why, thank you, your grace. My family spent many years and much capital cultivating this humble abode. I

shall bid you farewell.”

Theodoric closed the door, leaving Quintus in the expansive domed corridor. Turning, he marched for the marble stairs. Snapping his fingers at a slave, he whispered in the man’s ear, “He’s touring the vineyard later. Make sure the Prince of the Vandals is occupied with dice or vino.”

The slave nodded.

Quintus marched down the stairs. Across the way, and through throngs of people, he marched briskly. Bettors cheered and snorted in the various dice rooms. Out on the terrace at this western end of the estate, senators looked down upon the horse track, five or six of the beasts charging full tilt. Slaves watered and tended the various flowers propped up on Corinthian pedestals. The immaculate floors were being mopped.

Coming around a corner, he saw Lord Aybars, the elder Hun, standing rigid near the entrance of a gaming room. Quintus figured he should stop and say hello.

“Good day, my lord. Enjoying a little betting, are you?”

Before Aybars could reply, King Attila, almost glowing in his gaudy pink, came traipsing out the gaming room door. “He’s, like, totally wasted, it’s hilarious.”

“Ah, your grace,” sputtered Quintus, “I hope the gambling house is to your liking.”

“Oh, I don’t use schemes like this to waste my antoniniani, babe,” scoffed the king. “No, one of my lieutenants is like forty quid in the hole. His wife is, like, gonna slice his testicularum off – totes mcgoats. Am I right, Barsie?”

“Yes, my liege,” said Aybars.

“Ah, well, if there’s any issues, please speak to me. I wouldn’t want my guests to be in financial straits.”

“Don’t, like, get your panties in a bunch, Lord Quaestor. The Huns pay their debts. But I appreciate your hospitality, for sure.” The king turned to Aybars. “I, like, need a drink, for realsies.”

“My lord,” Quintus said to the barbarian king, “we have a most supple Italian vino. From my private stock. Please, allow me to have a slave fetch it for you.”

“Ew, do you know how many empty calories there are in vino? Like, seriously! Let’s ride, I saw a market on the way in which has just what I need. Lord Quaestor, you’re, like, totes gonna join us, right? It’s my treat for your hospitality. Come.”

Well, he had meant to schedule a meeting with General Aspar, but that could wait.

The Hun marched briskly outside. His own squires already had his transportation ready, and Attila mounted his shockingly red horse.

King Attila, along with a half-dozen or so of his best riders, went with Quintus and three of his charioteers and as many slaves, and rode into the markets. Shopkeepers tended to wooden stalls. The men wore sandals and dust-stained togas. At last, the barbarian king arrived at a beverage shop owned by Nubians and selling various foreign drinks from Africa, the Near East and Aethiopia. They went inside. There was a strong smell of something. Wood-panelled counter, papyrus-based disposable cups, stale pastries near the cash box.

“Uh, coffeum,” said Quintus, unsure of what to order.

The Nubian snatched a papyrus cup and a quill. “Can I get a name for the order?”

“Quintus.”

The shopkeeper spelled it wrong. A second Nubian got to work boiling water and scooping beans.

Attila stepped up and leaned heavily on the counter. “I’ll take a triple mocha-espressiato, with caramel and extra chai. And it just haaaas to be horse milk. Kumiss if possible.”

“Uh, my lord, we don’t have any kumiss.”

“Can you believe this place?” Attila scoffed to no one in particular. “Do you at least have horse milk? I swear to God, if you so much as look at goat’s milk, I’ll play your ribcage like a xylophone tonight.”

Shuffling down the counter, the king said to Quintus, “I absolutely looove this Aethiopian stuff. I would, like, literally die without it. Uh, don’t you dare use a papyrus cup for that espressiato. Those just wind up straight in the Mediterranean. We need to think of the environment. Save the planet, or there won’t be anything left for my to rape and pillage. Here, use this.”

The king then produced his own beverage holder – an upturned human skull.

They were served. King Attila immediately loaded up his espressiato with powders and seasonings. They sat at a table. The king clutched his upturned skull with both hands, sniffed the concoction like the scent was that of fine mutton after two weeks stranded in the Arabian desert, then gulped deeply. His face was nearly orgasmic when he swallowed.

“Anywaaaay,” he said, “I was hoping to ask a little favour. I know that my brother Caesar wants to, like, present Nori to me and all... it’s a little outdated, but whatever, I can totally respect that. But, do you think maybe you could, like, let the praetorian guards have an extended coffeum break tonight? Like, I shouldn’t be saying this, but Nori wants to sneak over to my tent. It’s... well, you know what it’s like to be in love, don’t you Quinny?”

Quintus was aghast. Was the king of the Huns really asking this of him.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that, girl. We’re gonna totally be safe. I mean, I shouldn’t say it, but we’re friends, right? You know what they say – of pregnancy, Venus does not speak, when you make love like a Greek.”

Then the king guffawed riotously.

Quintus blinked, his mouth agape.

Suddenly, Lord Aybars entered. Spotting his liege, he pounced, rushing up to the king. Something was urgently whispered in the king’s ear.

“What?!” proclaimed Attila loudly. “OMG! Those little bastards!”

King Attila and his retinue rapidly departed, rushing back to the Monteus Carleus estate. Quintus, still bamboozled, accompanied them.

The king had refused the set of palatial suites offered to him on his arrival, and had instead requested a secluded part of the estate whereupon he could establish a tent beneath the stars. Quintus had made the arrangements, and the Huns had been given a plot in the rear of the vineyard. Racing through the main gate, past the gambling house, the barbarians went there now, down rows of manicured fields until they reached their tents. White, tall and circular, Quintus found them to be queer living quarters for a king. A pen had been erected right beside them, with horses grazing, and an old woman was churning milk in an enormous iron cauldron out front.

Quintus was suddenly unsure if he should have accompanied the Hunnish menace so far. They clearly had urgent business of their own to attend to. He was about to bid them adieu, when suddenly an angry King Attila bellowed, “OMG! Like, offer the quaestor some kumiss! Do you, like, want us to have a bad reputation?”

A Hun scooped a large ladle’s worth of the milk from the cauldron. She was about to deposit it into an upturned skull, but Quintus quickly stopped her. “Uh, uh, here, use this instead. Latin tradition.”

He had kept the papyrus-based cup from the Nubian coffeum shop, handed that over.

King Attila, along with Lord Aybars and some other courtiers, ducked into the nearby tent, the king whipping the door to the side angrily.

It seemed part of the Hun confederacy, a group called the Gepids, whose lands were somewhere near the Carpathian Mountains, was rebelling in their overlord’s absence.

Inside the tent were meagre sleeping pallets and a few tables. At a central table, a large map was unspooled. It showed the full breadth of Europa, with detailed coastlines for the northern lands above Germania, vast stretches of space eastwards to the Black Sea and beyond. Besides Lord Aybars and a number of other lords and noblemen, there were three court ladies in the tent, all of them Saxones or Frisii by the look of their blonde hair.

One of the court ladies said, “OMG, Tilly, like what’s the big deal?”

King Attila replied, “Those damned Gepids, like, I can’t even...”

Two young lads fawning over the map were evidently the king’s sons. They had longish hair, though not as long as their father’s, wore their shirts open to display taut abdominals, and a permanently vacuous look on their faces like they’d smoked way too much henbane. One of them said, “Bruh, like, we should teach them a lesson, maaaaan.”

The other one said, “Totally.”

One of the court ladies said, “Tilly, like, we’re supposed to be on vacatiooon.”

Another lady, filing her fingernails, said, “Like, haven’t you been good to those Gepids? Like, you let them have all those hookups with those skank Scythians.”

The third court lady said, “Skankthians, laughter.” She actually said the word ‘laughter’ rather than just laughing.

One of the king’s sons said, “Bodacious!”

Attila said, "I'm, like, totally going to grease up a nine-foot pike and impale those bastards through their tushyyy." "

"Radical," said one son.

"Gnarly," said the other, smirking.

One of the court ladies said, "Don't threaten me with a good time," and guffawed.

"This sounds like important Hunnish business," Quintus cut in. "I should leave you to it."

He went for a door, hoping to bow out quietly. But, evidently, it was not the same door he came in through. It opened into another tent, connected to this one via an adjoining door.

This tent was as spacious as the first one. There was a young woman here, perhaps only a few years older than his own daughter. She was petite, barely one hundred and thirty librae, slight of frame, thin of waist. Her hair was black. She was not of the Scythian features of the Hunnish nobles, but looked more Germanic in nature. She worked eagerly at various potions and tinctures, a vast array of glass canisters and beakers on the table before her. She was mixing two liquids together when she looked up to glare at him.

"Oh, sorry," he said, "I thought this was the exit."

"Ach du lieber!" she barked tyrannically. "What are you doing here?!" The words vomited out of her fanatically. She had a densely thick Germanian accent.

"I.. I'm sorry..."

Suddenly, there was a knife in her hand. She had murder in her eyes. "You should not have seen mein poisons!"

Quintus now had his back to the wall, this waif of a girl advancing on him with a gleaming knife.

The door opened again. Quintus looked. One of King Attila's sons entered. Quintus looked back at the girl. All her tinctures were gone, as was the knife.

The Hunnish prince said, "Oh, like, quaestor dude, there you are. My pops wants me to see you, like, safely back to the main house, I guess. Hey, I see you've met Ildico. She's, like, a totally righteous dudette, bruh. She's gonna be my dad's new honey. I mean, this thing with the princess might happen first – that'd be totally tubular – but Illy's already set to tie the knot."

Quintus looked to the girl. She was perhaps eighteen years of age, young, fresh – a maiden. She was probably some Germanian nobleman's daughter, pledged to King Attila in a marriage alliance. Of course the Huns would have multiple wives. A man such as Attila would take everything he could reasonably (and even unreasonably) lay his hands upon. He was claiming all of Gaul for himself, after all, and already had claims on the Visigothic kingdom in Aquitaine. Multiple women in his bed, and multiple women to whom he gave the title wife were simply natural.

Then Quintus came to a realization. The poisons, the knife. She was...

She did not want to be the seventh, or ninth, or ninety-third wife of a pink-clad, blonde barbarian sipping

elaborate coffeum from the upturned human skull of some Gepid chieftain who dared heard his goats southward rather than the northward he'd been commanded to.

Quintus smiled inwardly. This problem – the problem of Honoria, the claim on Gaul, the barbarians at the gates – it might just take care of itself.

“Uh, this way, broheim,” said the young man.

When the lad turned to the door, the Germanian girl held a finger to her lips in a maniacal shushing gesture. Quintus nodded.

The quaestor and the lad stepped out of the tent and into the warm sunshine.

Quintus said, “That’s all right, my boy, I can escort myself back. This estate is perfectly safe. The emperor has his own praetorian guard on patrol. But thank you for your hospitality.” He gulped the mare’s milk in his papyrus cup. “Your kumiss is excellent. Give my regards to your father.”

With that, Quintus left the teen, and strolled through the expansive vineyard. Knowing the Germanian girl was working her own schemes brought a smile to his face for the first time since trumpeters arrived, preceding the emperor. In fact, he was giddy. He was over the moon. He would report immediately to Caesar Valentinian. The emperor and his chief general would have to strategize – they needed to deny the Hun his bride, and send him on his way to marry the young girl instead. The barbarian menace would be no more, the empire could thrive once again, and Quintus himself would be remembered for doing his part to defend the bastion of civilization.

He passed by a praetorian guardsman, who was marching the grounds on patrol. Quintus clapped his hand on the man’s shoulder. “Beautiful day, soldier,” he beamed.

He plucked a grape from a nearby tree and popped it greedily into his mouth. Birds chirped. He walked on, almost skipping.

Down the way, he came across his daughter’s slave girl, the one who’d sketched the backside of Princess Honoria, who he’d banished to the fields. She carried a heavy yoke on her shoulders, overfull buckets of grapes hanging from either side. Her face was dirt-stained and her hands were blistered. Following his earlier order not to speak to anyone of high standing, she said nothing, instead merely shuffled to the side of the path.

“Tell the overseer not so heavy a load,” he said merrily.

She looked up, surprised.

“You’ll be back doing Aemilia’s makeup in no time, my girl.”

Going around a corner, he found Senator Flavius Bassus Heculanus. The man was sitting on a wooden bench near the pond, observing the ducks frolic. For a second, Quintus considered rushing up and telling the man all was well, the princess would be his any day now. But, at the last minute, he decided against it. Quintus wasn’t sure how much Heculanus knew about Caesar’s schemes. Did he know the princess was sending pictures of her backside to the pink-clad barbarian, or that she was scheming to sneak into his tent tonight?

Quintus decided not to speak on this. Instead, he said, “Ah, Senator Heculanus, a lovely day, is it not?”



Somewhat startled Quintus was there, Herculanus turned back. “Oh, Quaestor. I didn’t see you there. Such a lovely estate you have. I must have you up to my place at some point.”

I was there two years ago, you old fool, Quintus thought.

Herculanus gradually pulled himself to his feet. “Come, walk with me, my lad.” He began in the direction of the Gambling House. “I’ve had no luck at Tali, I’m afraid. Came out here for some fresh air.”

Quintus walked with the man, slowing to match the senator’s pace.

Senator Herculanus was perhaps fifty-five years of age. His hair was greying, sparse on top. He walked with a slight stoop, his arms wiry. His jowls hung loosely on his neck.

Quintus walked with the man through the vineyard.

“The grain harvests from Aegyptus are down seven percent from last annum,” droned the senator. “The sea routes must now bypass Sicilia and come up the Aegean, in account of the Vandal Kingdom, and their inability to deal with piracy.”

Quintus was not paying attention to anything the man was saying.

Another praetorian guardsman approached them on the pathway. When their paths converged, the guardsman stepped to the side and saluted mightily, barking, “Senator! Quaestor!”

“Carry on,” muttered Quintus as Herculanus blathered about something or other.

“And the taxes Ravenna has to pay to Constantinople – it’s poppycock!”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, right you are.”

“And another thing...” huffed the senator.

But he wasn’t able to stutter out the remainder of that sentence. Behind them, a handful of Huns rushed up. King Attila was with them, as was his adviser, Lord Aybars. Attila was still in the leather riding gear which he’d worn to market, still had the Sword of Mars buckled to his belt. His blond hair was tied back, like the tail of a pony, a puffy violet bind revealing the shorn left side of his scalp.

“OMG! Quaestor Quintus!” greeted the Hun king flamboyantly. “Sorry to have left you like that, I’m such a bitch! Those damned Gepids, I mean, I can’t even! Anyway, I’ve sent my sons to deal with those dickweeds. Oh, who’s this old guy?”

Quintus did not want to say this was the Lady Honoria’s other potential betrothed. He sputtered, stammered out, “Uh, my lord, this is Senator Herculanus.”

He prayed the barbarian king had not been told of Caesar Valentinian’s plot to quickly marry his sister off and thus deprive the rival emperor.

“Uh, Senator, this is the king of the Huns and lord of all Europa beyond the Danube—”

“Tilly,” the pink-clad king cut in. “My friends call me Tilly.”

“Hail Caesar,” barked Herculanus, saluting his arm high.

“Totes.”

“Back in my day,” blathered Herculanus, “the barbarians at the gates were Goths and Vandals. Not like the rubbish plundering the empire these days.”

Suddenly, a whistle sounded across the vineyard, someone blowing loudly with pinched fingers. Quintus knew there were praetorian guardsmen on patrol, securing the estate and the gambling house, so he whipped his head around. Looking hither and thither, he finally spotted a woman in the window on the second floor of a villa some distance off. She was leaning on her elbows on the sill, her head poking out of the building.

It was the Augusta, Lady Honoria, her black stola easily identifying her. It was the villa to which she’d been billeted. And both of her suitors were here, five hundred of so pedes away.

“Yoohoo!” called the lady in a giddy tone, waving her arms in huge sweeps.

Quintus held his breath. Who was she calling to? By the effervescent tone, most assuredly it was to Attila. But Herculanus would be right to assume it was meant for him. As far as Quintus knew, King Attila was not aware of the other as a competing suitor. What would Attila do if he discovered Caesar Valentinian’s preferred choice for his sister’s hand stood a mere five pedes away? Quintus was aware of the divinely enchanted Sword of Mars at Attila’s hip, and his reputation for ruthlessness; he had slain his own brother, after all, and had decimated Thrace and Illyricum and nearly Constantinople itself. What would Herculanus do if he discovered this was the man the princess had sent her ring to, far across the Danube? Pink and blonde and high of voice? He would surely have every right to be incensed, insulted. The emperor needed to ship his unruly meretrix of a sister off to some quiet country estate to be forgotten, and Herculanus had the job of babysitter for the brat. Would he storm out, his house disgraced by the emperor for trying to pawn off a barbarian’s whore? *This* barbarian’s whore?

“Is that Nori?” King Attila asked with a smirk.

Herculanus squinted in the direction of the waving woman.

In the window, Honoria reached behind her back and unclasped her stola, letting it fall below the window sill. Then she grasped herself suggestively, and blew a kiss. The entire vineyard could see the woman’s mammae. And what’s more, she had tattooed herself like a common criminal, both of her glands stamped with jet black spider webs, spreading outwards from the papillae and painting nearly the entire mamma. She looked of no higher class than lion feed in the Colosseum.

“Oh, that’s deliciouuuuss,” drawled Attila, clearly too unrefined to see the low class debasement of the wench.

Herculanus squinted harder, his eyes like slits. “I say, is that my fiancéum?”

Quintus decided to concoct a fib. Herculanus would recognize the crassness of the tattoos, and Quintus couldn’t afford to have a dispute – certainly not a dispute regarding the princess’ mammae – break out between the high-ranking senator and the barbarian emperor here in his own vineyard.

“No, no, of course not,” Quintus babbled to Herculanus, hoping Attila would not carry on the conversation. Now that he thought about it, Herculanus probably didn’t even see the tattoos; he was so blind he probably thought the lady had exposed a black undergarment.

The next bit happened too fast for Quintus to fully understand. He, Attila and his lords, Herculanus and some slaves, were standing in the vineyard, Quintus trying desperately to distract all from the lewd display in the villa. A praetorian guardsman walking their way did not yield the path. Quintus had some notion in his mind the man was going to comment lasciviously on the Augusta's mammae, and the quaestor would have to have the man reported and probably posted to some far-off border fort along the Rhine.

But then the guardsman moved more swiftly. He was a big man, standing a head taller than Quintus. He grabbed a female slave and shoved her off the path, then rammed his shoulder into Lord Aybars. Suddenly, his gladius was in his hand, unsheathed in the presence of a quaestor and foreign embassy. The point gleamed in the sun. The man's face was twisted in fury. Spitting, he bellowed, "For Illyricum!"

The whole thing had happened in a second or two. Now this burly man stood before the Hunnish king, blade drawn, his arm drawing back, ready to put the full force of his upper body into it—

Immediately, acting on a warrior's instinct, Attila grasped and unsheathed his blade. The supposed Sword of Mars came whipping out of the scabbard on his belt, cleaved smoothly through the air in a fast-moving arc—

And cut cleanly through the exposed throat of the would-be assassin. The praetorian guardsman dropped his gladius and stumbled. Crimson blood cascaded from the open wound, the arteries of the throat sliced cleanly through. The man could be heard to gurgle, his oesophagus also neatly bisected. He reached for his throat hopelessly and collapsed to a knee. He was already dead; he just didn't know it yet.

The sounds of death were grotesque and horrific, the pathetic gasps of a drowning man. Quintus vomited a little in his throat.

King Attila leapt up like a Carthaginian elephant seeing a mouse scurry hither and thither. "Ew!" he proclaimed loudly. "You're getting blood everywhere! These boots are imported from Thrace, how dare you?!"

Lord Aybars pounced to his feet. One arm around his king, the man drew Attila back. The guardsman fell to the dusty earth, face-down. His gurgling stopped. Still, Aybars, acting fast, unsheathed a dagger and buried it in the man's back.

Attila said, "I was expecting so much more from Monteus Carleus. I mean, an assassin, really?"

Aybars once more put an arm around his king, forcing him back. The other Hun noblemen drew their blades. Quintus stepped back, his heart hammering.

Senator Herculanus said, "Oh, dear, it seems this chap has tripped and fallen."

Quintus grabbed the senator's toga and yanked. The slaves put themselves between Hun and Roman.

From behind his men, Attila muttered, "This place is totally getting a bad review, like, seriously."

Glaring at Quintus, Lord Aybars snarled, "We are leaving this instant. If there is so much as a bug beneath our horses' hooves, the Christian god's wrath shall descend upon you without mercy or reprieve."

Quintus was stammering. "My lords, I profusely apologize. I knew nothing of this—"

"And we shall be taking our new empress back to the safety of Hungary. Have her at the main entrance, with

her retinue and possessions, in ten minutes. The details of the fiefdom of Gaul, we can iron out later.”

“But... but, my lord—”

Then Aybars hissed something to his men and, obediently, they formed a tight cluster around their king and hurried off, back towards their tents.

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“His brother was slain by the Huns in Illyricum in ’41.”

It had been less than fifteen minutes since the attack, and General Flavius Aetius already had a papyrus file on the dead soldier as thick as a book of philosophy.

“His entire unit has been confined to quarters and disarmed, but it seems he acted alone. A whim. He saw the tyrant and thought it was his duty to act.”

Quintus was reeling. King Attila had already survived an assassination attempt from Constantinople, which embarrassed the former Caesar of the East and cost many concessions in gold, and now his diplomatic embassy to the West was marred with violence and deceit as well.

“An *assassination attempt* occurred on my estate!” Quintus snarled.

Aetius waved it away. “It wasn’t an assassination attempt, just some anus with an axe to grind. And, from what I hear, Tilly handled himself quite well.”

“Tilly? Even you’re calling him Tilly now?”

“I squired with him for years.”

A centurion burst in, barking a report to the general. Quintus nearly leapt from his skin at the man’s sudden, violent entrance.

Aetius dismissed the centurion with a grunt.

Quintus paced, nearly pulling out his hair. “The Huns are leaving, and they want to take Honoria with them.” He huffed. “I, frankly, think they should.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” rebuffed Aetius. “I already have my best men guarding over her, and I’ll be going to her villa myself as soon as I’m done here.”

“Let Tilly take the wench,” Quintus seethed through clenched teeth. He suddenly liked this plan forming in his mind. “Caesar doesn’t care about her, and do you think she and Attila could forge any sort of unified front – she’d be a liability for him. Caesar says that his sister’s a traitor, that she spreads her legs to barbarians, that she’s a usurper – hell, he could say she was abducted by the Hunnish menace and recruit whole armies on the claim.”

Aetius smirked. “So eager to get us out of your hair? I rather like this inn, and I think Tilly does, too. Certainly Caesar enjoys your gaming rooms. Listen, Quaestor, you go inform Caesar of this. I’m going to the Augusta’s villa. If Caesar himself wants to let her go, I am nothing if not a loyal servant. Otherwise, we defend her to the death.”

He shoved the papyrus folder into Quintus' hands, then grabbed his gladius and marched out.

Quintus proceeded rapidly through the gambling house. His hands were shaking as he glided through the hallways. How does he tell the emperor that his would-be brother was nearly slain in the Decidian family estates?

Taking a deep breath, he turned the doorknob, stepped into the private dice room. Caesar Valentinian was still there, still drunk. Vino bottles were everywhere, as were foreign imports – barley beer from Germania, *heget*-style beer from Aegyptus, whiskeum from Britannia, something called vodkus from north of the Black Sea.

“Ah, Quintus, my good man,” boomed the emperor. “Here, have a throw on me.” He foisted dice into the quaestor's hand. “Rub 'em against her ubera. This wench has Fortuna with her.”

A slave girl stood nearby, her dress down to her waist. Unlike the princess, her supposedly lucky mammae were not defaced with tattoos.

“Uh, my lord Caesar...” began Quintus.

“Oh, what is it, Quaestor?” groaned Valentinian, reverting to Quintus' proper title. “The barbarians can't find the right pink dye for their leather? My sister wants a lunch date with that blonde pony-fornicator? Herculanus has misplaced his keys again? Can't you deal with it?”

“Sir... My lord, it's rather more complicated than that.” He was holding the papyrus folder of the slain guardsman. He sputtered. Blinking, he said, “May I ask, what precisely is the plan regarding the Huns?”

“I don't know, we'll figure something out. Maybe I'll give him some senator's daughter. Oh, so sorry, Honoria was already betrothed. She'd had a little too much vino when she wrote that letter. Please accept our condolences, here's some senator's whelp to form an alliance. Hey, have you considered quelling the Celts in Britannia? Have at it, my Hunnish brethren. Something like that. Write it up. Listen, Quint, my boy, throw the dice and fetch me some more whiskeum, eh?”

Quintus lost it. Stamping his foot down, he whipped the folder across the dice table and threw the dice to the floor with such force the ivory nearly shattered. He took one large step towards the impudent Caesar. “You want me to handle it?” he barked. “Fine. I'm giving the Huns your sister. They're about to burst in and take her anyways. Your late co-ruler in Constantinople recommended as much. Herculanus is a dolt, and Honoria is an absolute pain in the gluteus. I'll tell General Aetius to stand down and not draw blood, the Huns will take their bride, we will claim there was impropriety on their part. No Gaul. In the months to come, we pay them off with some gold, we keep Gaul, they keep Honoria.”

Valentinian had a thousand pedes stare.

Quintus turned to march out.

Caesar Valentinian said, “Wait.” The word was commanding, exacting.

Quintus froze. Turning back, he saw Caesar blinking at the various pieces of papyrus scattered across the table. The drunken emperor said, “Invite the Huns to hash this out, here and now, in this room. Bring Honoria as well. And our foreign guests – the Goths, the Vandals, General Aspar. I want witnesses.”

Quintus took a deep breath. At last, he said, “As you wish, my Lord Caesar.”

“Oh, and Quaestor Decidian,” the emperor added as Quintus turned to go. “You ever speak to me like that again, and it’ll be your daughter I marry to that blonde barbarian pony-shagger.”

Quintus swallowed hard.

Squatting down, Valentinian retrieved the dice scattered on the floor. “Now,” said the emperor in a cheerier tone, “squeeze the dice betwixt her mammae and do the goddamned throw.”

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“This is, like, horse dung,” scoffed King Attila. “Like, totes mcgoats, don’t you agree Quinny?”

They were marching through the ornate hallway of the Monteus Carleus, the private dice room just ahead. Corinthian pedestals with rare flowers, domed ceilings with elaborate frescoes.

“My lord,” said Lord Aybars, “this is our chance to argue your case, and retrieve the woman who is rightfully yours.”

Attila stopped moping and revealed the tiniest of smiles. “She did look totally gorgeous when she showed my the goodies. Oh, fine, I’m, like, such a sucker for love. But Barsy, we don’t budge an inch, okay?”

“One hundred percent agreement, my lord.”

Quintus rushed ahead and opened the door. The dice table had been pushed back. A heavy wooden table had taken its place, twice as long, stacks of papyrus, lemon water in pitchers.

The Emperor Valentinian sat in an ornate chair at the far end of the long table. He still looked less-than-sober, though was not as bad as he’d been an hour before. To his right sat Magister Militum Flavius Aetius, the supreme military might of the West. Next was King Theodoric of Aquitaine, followed by Prince Huneric of Carthage, and Magister Militum Flavius Ardabur Aspar from Constantinople. On the other side of the table, close to her brother, was the Augusta, Justa Grata Honoria, with her black stola and garish makeup. She clearly wished to bound for the door and embrace her beloved, though Valentinian had probably commanded her with all the authority of the emperor of Rome to stay at his side.

Senator Flavius Bassus Herculanius was not present.

“Nori!” ejaculated Attila, ecstatic to see his ‘betrothed’.

Ignoring politeness, ignoring court protocol, the king marched briskly for the princess. Before anyone knew what was happening, Attila was there, her hand in his. He stooped at the waist, and passionately kissed her. She embraced him eagerly, her arms wrapping around him. They slobbered over each other, tongues dancing around each other’s mouths.

“Enough,” commanded Valentinian.

Attila ceased the kiss, stood, had to wipe some of ‘Nori’s’ black lipstick off his face. “Love you, girl,” he said to the princess flirtatiously, before proceeding to the far end of the table, opposite Valentinian.

Attila relaxed in the chair, slouching back. He put his feet up, pink and white leather boots thumping down on the ornate table. His eyes first settled on King Theodoric. The Goth and the Hun had a long history with each

other. Indeed, before this current ploy for Gaul using the princess, Attila had had a massive troop build-up on the far banks of the Rhine. Officially, so he said to Ravenna, was that he was going to subdue his 'rebellious subjects', the bastards in Aquitaine under the command of the insurrectionist Theo. It was widely believed to be his pretext for Gaul prior to the Honoria affair. "Hey there, slaaave! You're shacking up with Val now? Girl, you can do so much better."

Next he zeroed in on General Aspar. The two knew each other from Attila's various communications with and harassments of Byzantium. In fact, if Quintus was informed properly, Aspar owned a dwarf slave once owned by Attila, who performed for Royal audiences in Hungary. "Flavius Aspar?" drawled the king. "More like Flavius Ass-Subpar, am I right? Girl, you need to spend less time on that horse and more time mastering those stairs."

"Must we suffer this abuse?" grunted Huneric, prince of the Vandals.

Valentinian raised a hand to silence his guest, but Attila had already seized the opportunity. "This pantywaist," he proclaimed to the room at large, but especially to Valentinian, to whom he swung his gaze mercilessly. "I hear you're giving your child daughter to this miscreant. That's, like, totally gross. And all I want to do is have some super sexy fun times with your adult sister in the palace in her new fief, like, for real."

"Oh, how my loins call for thee, dearest," Honoria cooed gleefully.

Valentinian raised a hand, as though to slap her.

In a low voice, Attila said, "Lay a hand on her and you shall leave this room in a bucket."

His demeanour had shifted, no longer playful and ebullient. He'd said it low, not menacingly, but he was deathly serious.

No one spoke. No one took such a threat made by the Scourge of God lightly.

Valentinian lowered his hand. "Shall we get down to business?"

Caesar interlocked his fingers and leaned forward purposefully at the table. "You want the female canis? She's yours."

Honoria was not the only one aghast. Quintus was scandalized that the emperor would use such language about his own sister – never mind the shock that he was actually giving her up. Attila, too, was surprised.

Before the Hun could say anything, Valentinian quickly added, "But no Gaul. You will have not one inch of Gaulish territory. In fact, since my beloved sister had already been promised to another when she made such a proposal to you – a very wealthy and powerful patrician, I might add – the Hunnish Empire must make amends with that powerful family. Ten thousand solidi of gold might do it. Or, perhaps a daughter. Ravenna had promised the family one princess in marriage. You could be a good brother-in-law and see that a princess is delivered... if not one of Roman blood, than one of Hunnish blood."

"Uh..." sputtered Attila, clearly at a loss for words.

"As for a fief, may I offer Britannia."

Lord Aybars immediately retorted, "No Roman has set foot in Britannia for decades."

Theodoric responded, “And you have not set foot in Aquitaine, yet you claim my lands for your own.”

Quintus looked from Valentinian to Theodoric to Attila and back. He got the impression this little back and forth had been orchestrated between the emperor and the Gothic king.

Breaking the uncomfortable silence, Honoria said, “I am not whiling away my days in Londinium.”

“And I would not subject her to that,” the pink-clad king sputtered. “No, my dear, you shall have the most elaborate palace built in Lugdunum—”

“Which daughter would you give to Senator Herculanus?” enquired General Aetius. “Hrekja? Or the young one... what was her name?”

Aetius had been a hostage of the Huns for many years. He’d seen the Hunnish camp, knew all the men and women of Attila’s retinue. He’d surely know the names of every one of the king’s various children.

Ignoring the daughter question, Lord Aybars said, “If Ravenna wishes to finance the Hunnish army in the pursuit of the reconquest of Britannia—”

“The Britons and the Saxons seized hundreds of thousands of gold solidi when they expelled our magistrates,” rebuffed Valentinian. “By all means, collect from them in whichever way you see fit.”

Aybars looked furious, turning a shade of purple.

Huneric said, “I think in exchange for Hrekja, his majesty should name her husband a consul.”

“That’s a great idea,” exclaimed Valentinian. “A consul’s wife, how does that sound for my dear brother?”

Attila abruptly rose from his chair. The room went silent, startled by the sudden move. “I treated you as a brother, Val. Do you know how many Suebians wanted to hack away at Gallia Belgica? I came to you, as a man, face to face. I prostrated myself before you in front of these degenerates and slaves. I was nearly cut down by one of your lackeys in this know-nothing town – I mean, for realises. You don’t want me as a friend and a brother, fine, whatever. We’ll see how well you do without me.”

Aybars rose to his feet as well. The king turned for the door.

Yes, Quintus thought. Now he’ll go back to Barbaricum, marry the Germanian girl, and she’ll lace his triple mocha chai espressiato with—

“Wait,” said Valentinian.

No! Quintus was screaming in his head. You buffoon, just let him go!

Valentinian rose from his chair. “What’s say we settle this here and now, as men? Fair, as witnessed by the gods, and these esteemed representatives from around the continent.”

Quintus had no idea what Valentinian was thinking. Perhaps he should interject, demand to speak to Caesar privately. The emperor didn’t know about the Germanian girl. But that could upset everything. Goth and Vandal in the same room despite the fact that they hate each other. Constantinople’s man here to observe and report back to a new strongman Caesar in the East, who’d recently ceased all tribute payments to the Huns. A



lustly princess bent on cleaving the empire in twain just as soon as she cleaves her legs for this blonde barbarian.

Valentinian said, “Fortuna herself shall decide. One game of Tali, in this room, here and now. If you win, you may have Honoria with my blessing, and she can control Gaul as her own fief, beget to her children when she passes. We shall have peace between us, with the Po as our border. If I win, the Rhine is our border, and no Hun shall cross it unless I personally request it. Honoria shall wed the man she’s betrothed to in Ravenna, and you shall recognize and respect the territorial integrity of Rome’s allies. Peace, in either case.”

Quintus’ jaw nearly hit the floor. This degenerate gambler is going to throw half the empire to the wind with a game of dice? Of all the hairbrained, hogwash schemes... *this* was his brilliant plan?

Honoria, too, was aghast, her black-framed mouth hanging open. She blinked rapidly, utterly at a loss for words.

Flavius Aetius said, “My lord... perhaps we could discuss this...”

“You’re a drunken degenerate,” snarled Theodoric. “You already owe me thirty thousand solidi in gambling debts, and I’m supposed to stand by as you gamble away my buffer state?”

“You owe me *fifty* thousand solidi,” growled Huneric.

Aybars said, “Should we really be reducing this fine woman to chips in a betting pot?”

Flavius Aspar said, “Constantinople will not continue to finance your frontier forts if—”

“Agreed,” said Attila with a smirk.

And, just like that, before Quintus could even grab hold of his thoughts, the fate of half the empire now rested on a literal throw of the dice.

“Uh...” Quintus gasped, utterly bewildered at what had just transpired.

“Quaestor, your input is not required,” grunted Caesar Valentinian.

Attila marched over and planted another wet, slobbery kiss on his beloved. Kneeling before her, he said, “OMG, babe, I’m, like, totes gonna win your hand in marriage. It’s gonna be, like, awesome.”

Honoria, still gobsmacked, came back to herself. Turning to face her brother, she said, “If you’re allowed to court Fortuna by rubbing the dice upon the mammae of some trollop, then my betrothed shall court her thus, using my—”

Quintus finally choked out some words. “No! No courting Lady Luck and no lucky body parts.”

Stripping a princess at such a summit would be the absolute last shred of dignity the empire had gone down the drain. Never mind her low-class tattoos.

“Agreed,” said Valentinian. “No prayers, no women, no blowing on the dice. A simple throw.”

Theodoric, Huneric, Aspar and Aetius cleared the table off to the side, and dragged the dice table back to the centre of the room.

“One throw,” said Valentinian.

Huneric stepped up and presented Caesar Valentinian with four dice. Theodoric stepped up and likewise presented King Attila with dice.

Valentinian stepped up to the table, and without ritual or preamble, threw the dice as though they were a mere afterthought.

The room was deathly silent, the tumbling of dice the only sound.

They came to rest. A six, a second six, a three, a four.

Honorina inhaled sharply.

Quintus held his breath. Valentinian nearly scored a Venus, the highest possible score. If that second six had been a one, the game would be all but over. As it stood, Attila would need to score a Venus in order to win.

Huneric quickly scooped up Caesar’s dice. All eyes fell upon King Attila.

Showing the same confidence as Caesar, the Hun lazily threw the dice into the walled table.

“Come on, Venus...” whispered Honorina.

The dice came to rest. Four ones pointed upwards to the ceiling.

“Vultures,” declared Flavius Aetius.

Attila had lost. He’d lost by a wide margin. Fortuna had clearly shown her will.

Theodoric quickly snatched up the dice, slipped them into his pocket. Turning to the Hunnish king, he said, “So sorry, my lord. I’m sure Senator Herculanus will take good care of her.”

Attila was dejected. He seemed almost not present, his mind elsewhere. He had a thousand pedes stare. Quintus was sure he was thinking about the Sword of Mars – he had the favour of the gods, how could they fail him now?

Valentinian said, “Please, enjoy the remainder of your stay here in Monoecus. Quaestor Decidian will comp you a thousand gold solidi for any gaming you wish to partake in. The vino, for you – my honoured guest – will be entirely gratis, in fact we’ll send a wagon of our finest back with—”

“Hold on!” snarled Princess Honorina.

The look on her face was one of fury, unbridled rage. Her fists were clenched at her sides. Quickly stomping up to Theodoric, she plunged her hand into his pocket. In one clean motion, she darted in and ripped her hand back out, the dice now in her palm. Opening her hand, she displayed them to the room despite the fervid jostling of both Theodoric and Valentinian.

Everyone could plainly see. The dice were counterfeit. Every side of each die displayed the number one.

“You *cheater!*” she howled before her brother could smack the dice from her hand.

Valentinian was flummoxed, speechless. He clearly wanted to assail the wench, backhand her right here, but he was caught. The deception was plain. Not even Quintus could deny it. Huneric and Theodoric, each having placed the dice in the bettors' hands, looked sheepish.

“You cunnus!” Honoria hissed. “You are a vile and ruthless anus, and I shall kill you in this very room—”

“I can't even,” muttered Attila, squelching her outburst.

All eyes went to the barbarian king. He still had the Sword of Mars at his belt, and Quintus had seen him gouge a man's throat out with it just two hours before. Lord Aybars stood by his sovereign's side, hand hovering near the pommel of his own blade.

Attila was dejected. Looking around the room, Theodoric, Huneric, Aspar from the East – none of them soliloquized on the unfairness of it. In fact, they'd all been in on it, their bickering a bit of theatre to entice the Hun into readily agreeing. He'd never get a fair shakedown with Caesar Valentinian.

Sighing, Attila said, “OMG, this, like, totally means war, you have no idea.”

Then he turned and marched indignantly from the room. He said nothing to his beloved, still irate, neck tendons bulging. He simply marched out, Aybars trailing him like a lapdog.

Honoria seethed, “I hope you know what you've done, brother. I tried to make this peaceful. You wouldn't have it.”

Then she, too, stormed out.

There was some grumbling from Theodoric and Huneric, Aetius went to whisper something to Aspar.

Quintus was still flabbergasted, standing there slack-jawed.

Valentinian shrugged, as though giving into nihilo. Reaching for a goblet which had toppled over when the table was being moved, he smirked mutinously at the quaestor. “Quintus, my good man, be a good lad and refill this, would you?”

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