

AAAAA

TTTTT

TTTTT

IIIII

UUUUU

AAAAA



First English Edition

a tragedy in four acts

YEVGENY ZAMYATIN

translated by Kai Swanson-Dale

A
T
T
I
L
A

a tragedy in four acts

YEVGENY ZAMYATIN

translated by Kai Swanson-Dale

Original title АТИЛЛА
by Yevgeny Zamiatin, 1928

English translation copyright © 2020 *by* Kai Swanson-Dale
Additional materials copyright © 2020 *by the same*

CONTENTS

Translator's Preface

Attila —

Act I	1
Act II	15
Act III	26
Act IV	38

Appendix: Table of Names 51

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Once again, I must begin with the disclaimer that I do not speak Russian, and can only read it a little, slowly and badly. But since no one who does speak or read (or translate) Russian has brought out an English version of this play, which I very much desired to read, once again that task, and delight, has fallen to me.

And it is a delight. Yevgeny Zamyatin's *Attila* is a powerhouse, one riveting scene to the next. The stakes are always high, the interactions tense, the plot twisting, the language subtle and colorful, the characters all too human. I ask you to determine: Who is the hero? Who is the villain? My answer is that they are all the heroes of their own narratives, which makes it true to life.

Zamyatin worked on *Attila* from 1925-1927, completing it in 1928. It received praise* at a reading by Leningrad's Bolshoi Drama Theater, which accepted the play for production, and had already announced the play's run and half-finished rehearsals when it was cancelled and banned by the censors. They interpreted it as an attack on the Soviet government, and an expression of Zamyatin's longing for the West—a west to which he was soon to escape, and in which he would reside in exile until his death in 1937. But I do not intend to delve into the politics of *Attila* here. If you like, you can read *Attila* as a straightforward drama, and one which I believe plays very well.

His *Attila* has been meticulously researched, as I discovered to my chagrin while tracking down obscure names of historical people. Thus I am able to report that most of the events that happen in the play also happened in real life... and those things that did not, could have.

As before (see *Big Kids' Fairytales*) I had help in this endeavor, and as before I do not care to say where. Suffice to say that my assistant likewise does not wish to be credited—has no preference one way or another, to be more precise.

With that said, I have made honest efforts to ensure the accuracy of the translation: to history, to the text, and to the spirit of the play. If it is good, which I think it is, very well; if it is bad, don't blame my assistant. As before, any mistakes or accidental omissions are entirely mine.

And now, without further ado, allow me to present...

* One factory representative compared it to Shakespeare (a comparison Zamyatin downplayed), calling it “tragic, action-packed, and captivating”, while another said that “all the moments are very strong and exciting”. Maxim Gorky considered it “highly valuable both literarily and socially” and said, “the heroic tone and its heroic plot could not be more useful in our modern day”. (Quotes from Zamyatin's “Letter to Stalin”, 1931.)

PEOPLE (DRAMATIS PERSONAE)

ATTILA, *the ruler of Great Scythia*

KIRKA, *his wife*

ILDEGONDA, *a hostage of Attila, daughter of the king of the Burgundians*

VIGIL, *her fiancé, one of the ambassadors of Eastern Rome*

SENATORS MAXIMINUS *and* PRISCUS, *ambassadors of Eastern Rome*

ONOGOST, EDECON, *and* ISLA, *Attila's closest associates*

ZIRCON, *a Moorish dwarf, Attila's fool*

AËTIUS, *the master of the Roman infantry and cavalry*

ANNIAN, *the Bishop of Aurelianium*

GOUR *and* CAMEL, *Roman slaves in Aurelianium*

MARULLUS, *a Roman poet*

DULEB, *a plowman*

YATVYAG, *one of Attila's dearest horsemen*

1ST HORSEMAN

2ND HORSEMAN

An AMBASSADOR FROM THE VANDALS

An AMBASSADOR FROM THE GAULS

Attila's HERALD

Attila's CUPBEARER

A SCYTHIAN KOBZAR (*bard*)

A GOTHIC SINGER

A CAPTIVE ETHIOPIAN

HORSEMEN *and* WARRIORS *of Attila*

BURGUNDIAN SOLDIERS *and* ROMAN WARRIORS (*in Aurelianium*)

[GUARDS]

[*A* STABLEMAN]

ACT ONE

Chamber in the palace of Attila: wood, rough-hewn. On a dais covered with hides there is a bench, with a second shorter bench off to the side. At the door to the inner chambers stands the CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD. The sounds of a Roman buccina and a reciprocal Scythian horn are heard.*

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD (*listening*): O-oh! A trumpet... (*To the 1ST GUARD.*) Zrrch, zrrch, look lively!

1ST GUARD (*runs, looks out the window, returns*): For us.

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD: Who?

1ST GUARD: Strangers.

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD: Shout that we're here—lively, now!

Exit 1ST GUARD.

EDECON (*enters. To the CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD*): Well... Guests for Attila.

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD: Who are they?

EDECON: Three ambassadors from Eastern Rome. What's more, the Burgundians met us along the way. They were riding here bringing Attila a hostage—the daughter of their king. A fine girl!

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD: Let's have a look!

EDECON: You'll be looking in vain. While we were all riding together, one of the Romans, the younger ambassador, got to know her... by scent, if you will. Keep your eyes peeled.

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD: Why?

EDECON: Because we're about to have such fun as never before... (*Pauses.*)

Enter VIGIL and ILDEGONDA.

* Trumpet.

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD: What do you mean by—?

EDECON: Hush, he's the... and with him is... Let's go in there. I'll tell you. *(They go to the inner chambers.)*

VIGIL *(to ILDEGONDA)*: Everything is like a dream, now it's all going to blow away like smoke. You will stay here with Attila, and I... And I— *(Stops.)*

ILDEGONDA: And you will go alone, through the steppes, along which we raced together. You will go back...

VIGIL: No...

ILDEGONDA: Why not? What is it you want to say?

VIGIL *(looks at ILDEGONDA silently. Then)*: My Ildegonda... *(Kisses her.)* Goodbye!

ILDEGONDA: Goodbye? But I will return to you in a year. Let the barbarian Attila, let the cruel wolf... even he will not touch the hostage.

VIGIL: I know.

ILDEGONDA: Then why is your kiss so bitter, as if to say goodbye forever, as if death is around the corner? Tell me quickly, while we're together. Are you silent? They are coming... tell me!

VIGIL: No!

PRISCUS'S loud nasal voice is heard. He enters with MAXIMINUS.

PRISCUS: My dear Vigil—I am quite sure that everything that is said about the Huns is a lie. These lovely savages are so respectful to me that I'm really somewhat embarrassed...

From the inner chambers, the 1ST GUARD and two others quickly enter.

1ST GUARD *(rushes towards PRISCUS, grabs him by the collar)*: Stop! Who are you?

MAXIMINUS: Roman ambassadors from Byzantium, to Attila. Do you understand me? Give way!

1ST GUARD *(to his men)*: O-oh! Here! Search them!

The GUARDS begin to search VIGIL.

VIGIL: Away, barbarians, slaves... First wash the dirt off your claws.

THE TWO OTHERS: Sla-a-aves? Are we sla-aves? Arrgh... grr... *(They draw swords on VIGIL.)*

1ST GUARD: Stop! Do not break their skin!

MAXIMINUS *(to the 1ST GUARD)*: Do you know Edecon? Why not ask him who we are?

1ST GUARD (*to the 2ND and 3RD*): If they give you any trouble, hit them on the noggin! (*He leaves.*)

PRISCUS (*to MAXIMINUS*): Trust me! I'll take care of everything from here... (*Going up to the GUARDS, begins a speech.*) My dear, dear barbarians!

2ND GUARD: Dear who?

PRISCUS: That is, in general, dear... uh, uh... creatures!

3RD GUARD: Tsst! In your place.

PRISCUS (*backs away hastily. To MAXIMINUS*): This... they're all joking, surely!

MAXIMINUS: Disgraceful. (*Sits on a bench, puts his head in his hands.*) That we, Romans, must endure all this. As beggars sit at his door, awaiting... what? Who knows?

PRISCUS: But, dear Maximinus, they say Attila is in a good mood today—and so am I. So we will make peace, we will save Rome—I'm sure we will.

MAXIMINUS: Yes, perhaps we will, if we, Romans, grovel before the barbarian, before the Hun Attila... And even then... he can shout to the Huns: "Stop!" But he can't stop time.

PRISCUS: What do you mean, stop time?

MAXIMINUS: You see my hands? They shake. My eyes? They water. Look at my mouth—it's toothless, see? These are the hands, the mouth, the eyes of Rome. Rome has become an old man, like me. And the barbarians, they stink of sweat, but their eyes and teeth... look: any one of them can push me, just as they can push Rome, and break Rome, like me, to pieces.

VIGIL: No, this will not happen!

MAXIMINUS: Do you know of a remedy that will cure death?

VIGIL: Yes, I know... death. (*He steps aside. ILDEGONDA is beside him.*)

ILDEGONDA: Vigil, you are pale! Your hand in mine trembles. What troubles you? Perhaps I can help you. My hands are not as gentle as yours, I cannot play the lute—but I can play with a spear and a knife... Won't you tell me?

VIGIL: I must be silent—I swore an oath. You will soon see all for yourself.

Enter EDECON, the CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD, and the 1ST GUARD. The CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD waves the GUARDS away from the

AMBASSADORS. EDECON *has an axe in his belt and a bag containing something round in his hands.*

EDECON (*to ILDEGONDA*): Hullo, sweetheart, your Burgundians await you in the courtyard.

ILDEGONDA *exits.*

(*to the AMBASSADORS*) Well, guests, greetings from your hosts. May you live as many years as the hairs on Maximinus's head.

THE GUARDS (*with fingers pointed at MAXIMINUS'S bald spot*): Ha, ha, ha!

EDECON: Shh! (*The GUARDS fall silent. To MAXIMINUS.*) Don't be angry with them: Smelling a fox, they cannot tolerate your Roman spirit. I told them they must pinch their noses and stand further away.

THE GUARDS: Ha, ha, ha!

PRISCUS (*to MAXIMINUS*): You see, I told you so! The great spirit of Rome must prevail—and it did!

MAXIMINUS *brushes him off, sits down, drooping. With a shrug, PRISCUS walks over to the GUARDS and holds out his hand.*

PRISCUS: Dear friends, I am your servant!

This makes no impression. PRISCUS shrugs, walks away.

HERALD (*runs through*): Attila! Attila! He's returned from the field—even now he enters his house!

VIGIL (*aside. EDECON is agitated*): Hurry—repeat it to me—say that our agreement is not forgotten, that you will...

EDECON (*giving him the bag he came in with*): Hold this.

VIGIL: What for? What is this?

EDECON: A present for Prince Attila. A melon.

VIGIL (*feeling the bag*): A melon? Wait a minute... wait... no! This melon ripened on a human neck!

EDECON [*aside*]: Even though he is a Roman, he is not a fool. He guesses rightly.

VIGIL: Whose head? Tell me—who?

EDECON: Vleda's.

VIGIL: Vleda? Attila's brother? Did you...?

EDECON: Not me—the axe.

VIGIL (*silent, then*): Edecon, forgive me.

EDECON: What for?

VIGIL: I believed you—and I did not believe. I was afraid you would change your mind. But this mute head speaks for you—screams—that you hate their animal offspring as I do, that Attila, this wolf... there is none worse... a mad dog...

EDECON (*grabs him by the throat*): Silence! Don't you dare!

VIGIL: Edecon, let me go! What are you doing?

EDECON (*in a different tone*): You fool—if they hear, everything is lost.

VIGIL: It seemed to me that... No, no, I know—I was wrong...

HERALD (*runs through*): Attila, Attila! Like the sun in the sky, he will rise now!

VIGIL: Yes, now... In a moment, a thin hair, taut like a string, and the horse of fate will rush, crushing people under its hooves... (*Grabs EDECON'S hand.*) So remember: I'll give Attila a letter, and as soon as he leans towards me, you will bite into him with an axe from behind, as I stab him in the chest.

EDECON: Rest assured, my axe will find... whoever it needs to.

VIGIL (*taking out his wallet and shaking it*): How gold rings—do you hear it? The emperor will dress you in it, head to toe.

EDECON (*looking at the wallet*): Give it to me. (*Snatches the wallet.*)

VIGIL: What for?

EDECON: Roman numbskull! Should I buy the guards or not? Otherwise they will slaughter us like rams.

VIGIL: My name is on there in gold embroidery... give me that wallet back. Here, take a different one.

EDECON: You still don't trust me? Then do it yourself. (*Holds out the wallet.*)

VIGIL: No, I trust you, I trust you. Only...

HERALD (*enters*): Attila! Attila! Praise him! Fear him! Rejoice!

Several WARRIORS rush in, dancing frantically to wild music. Enter KIRKA and Attila's dearest HORSEMEN. Then ONOGOST, ISLA, the jester ZIRCON, and, finally, ATTILA.

WARRIORS, GUARDS (*pounding on shields*): Hurrah, Attila! Hurrah, Attila!

ATTILA sits down; KIRKA sits on the lower bench. The rest remain standing, with the exception of PRISCUS, who sits down and straightens the folds of his robe.

EDECON (*rushing to him*): Get up, get up!

PRISCUS (*rising*): But why?

EDECON: Callous Roman, don't you know: only she can sit in his presence. (*Points to KIRKA.*)

PRISCUS: She? But why?

EDECON: Because she lies under him, if you see what I mean. Block-head.

ATTILA *looks around, everyone freezes. There is silence. He meets KIRKA'S gaze.*

KIRKA (*rises with a bow*): My husband, my prince, life and health!

ATTILA (*casually*): To you as well. Are you healthy? How did you sleep?

KIRKA: I could not sleep. I kept waiting for you...

ATTILA: Then... (*Sees YATVYAG among the assembly.*) What, Yatvyag is here? When did you return?

YATVYAG: Yesterday. I brought with me five hundred wagons...

ATTILA: Tell me later. Onogost, who do we start with?

ONOGOST: Whosoever you command. This side or that side, representing themselves, representing others. Eastern Rome has sent you ambassadors—Edecon brought them. They're standing over there. That bald one is a senator. Ye-es!

ATTILA: A senator? Ha! A senator to us, the barbarians? That's what the Romans call us, barbarian Scaveni, Slavs—but in our opinion, slaves. What an honor! Ambassador Senator to the slaves!

ONOGOST: Do you order me to call them?

ATTILA: Let them wait. We are barbarians—what can we do? You know my custom. I will see them in the order they came. Lead the one who came first.

ONOGOST: Well, before everyone else, was some kind of beggar. I told him...

ATTILA (*frowning*): What did you say?

ONOGOST: That he should go... (*Catching ATTILA'S gaze.*) No, that he should stay... That is, both the one and the other: that he should stay while going.

ATTILA: Call him now, you double-talker!

ONOGOST *runs to the door, lets DULEB in.*

DULEB (*rushes to ATTILA*): We appeal to your justice! We have not the strength to endure. We beat our foreheads before you.

ATTILA: Who are we?

DULEB: We are Duleb, we plow the earth and sow millet, that is our life. Your people pressed us... *(Pauses.)*

ATTILA: Well, what do you want? Continue!

DULEB: He is here... I'm afraid to speak!

ATTILA: I am here, too. Don't be afraid. Where is he? Reveal him!

DULEB *(pointing to YATVYAG)*: He... he pressed us, collected a quit-rent* from us. We gave it in full: to the extent of our obligation. And a day later, we see, he's here again, he wants the quit-rent. Well, it's an insult. We didn't pay. So he had us whipped, some to death, some to bleeding. Look at me: cut to ribbons! *(Turns his back, starts to drop his trousers.)*

ATTILA: No need—I believe you. *(To YATVYAG.)* Come here. Is he telling the truth? Look me in the eye!

YATVYAG, *trembling, stands silently, riveted by ATTILA'S eyes.*

ATTILA *(calmly, to YATVYAG)*: Go, kill yourself. Now!

YATVYAG *(approaches the GUARDS, they give him a knife, he stabs himself. As he falls he shouts)*: Attila—life and health!

They carry him away.

DULEB: You are merciful, prince... and terrible.

ATTILA: Not to you. Go.

DULEB *exits.*

ATTILA *(to Edecon)*: Ah, my axe! You've returned? Well, what did you see in Eastern Rome, eh?

EDECON: Women...

ATTILA: How are the women? And the emperor Theodosius?

EDECON: I could tell you, "I saw a mare", and you would ask me, "what kind of mare? And how about the tail?"

ATTILA: Crank. Perhaps I won't ask.

EDECON: Well. Theodosius grows on women like a mare's tail, and they twirl it however they like. While others, in order to resemble women, cut their *(demonstrates where)* with a knife, and their voices are women's voices, and their faces women's faces—eunuchs.

ATTILA: Did you see it yourself? Well. What did you hear?

EDECON: A name.

* A form of land tax.

ATTILA: Which one?

EDECON: Attila. Attila this, Attila that—Attila everything, you are stuck in their throats like a fish bone. They spit, but the bone is still there. All their hopes rest on one man to take it out.

ATTILA: Who is this physician?

EDECON: Aëtius.

ATTILA: Aëtius? The one I gave shelter when he fled from Rome in disgrace? Who fought by my side when we faced the Goths? He saved my life in that battle, remember? And now we are to be enemies? Well, a good enemy is dearer than a friend.

EDECON: The worst enemy is not in the field, but the house.

ATTILA: What are you talking about?

EDECON (*nudges the bag*): About this. I brought you a present. Take it. (*Gives ATTILA the bag.*)

VIGIL (*to the AMBASSADORS*): Now... look! Look!

ATTILA (*opens the bag*): Brother, Vleda... is that you?

THE HEAD (*in a whisper*): Vleda... Vleda! Vleda...!

Dead silence.

ATTILA (*to THE HEAD*): Are you silent? Can't you hear? Do you remember how, one time, we took Father's horse to the steppe, through the sun, the grass, the dust? You rode behind me and held on to me, breathing hot breath on my neck. Now, you breathe cold in my face... (*Looks silently.*) Do you remember when you threw an arrow at a frog? The frog twitched, then fell still, and you asked me: "What's wrong with it?" Well, what about you now? Have you fallen still? Are you silent? Do you know that the emperor has not received the letter, not Theodosius, but I? (*To EDECON.*) First you showed him the letter, then hit him with the axe, didn't you?

EDECON: Yes, that's right.

ATTILA: One blow, out of the blue—he didn't even shout?

EDECON: He did not have time.

ATTILA: Take my head off my shoulders the day you see me, like a dog with a dog, ally with Rome. Understand?

EDECON: I understand.

ISLA: Now, now, Attila!

ATTILA (*to THE HEAD*): Do you understand, too? Too late? Well, goodbye. My dear brother Vleda, the traitor... (*Kisses the head, closes the bag.*)

To EDECON.) So that everyone knows that he is a traitor, to punish his sons and grandsons, so that, remembering at night, they wake up with a cry, go hang his corpse from the palisade. Let him hold his head in his hands and meet the vultures—let them peck. Do you hear me? Go!

Everyone has frozen in place. EDECON, with the bag, retreats from ATTILA.

VIGIL (*rushes to EDECON*): Tell me, are you the devil himself—or who?
EDECON: You will find out soon. Look, your...

ILDEGONDA, *sumptuously dressed, enters and sits on a bench.*

ATTILA (*watching*): Who dares to sit there?

A rush toward ILDEGONDA from different directions. ATTILA stops them.

You know, we have a custom: that place is given to my wife to sit. Have you slept with me, and want everyone to know about it?

Laughter.

ILDEGONDA: Perhaps you have a custom that women should be given to animals. We don't have that custom. My mistake.

ATTILA: Make her stand! Lift her!

They run up to ILDEGONDA, force her to stand up, hold her roughly. VIGIL makes a movement towards ILDEGONDA. MAXIMINUS grabs his hand.

ILDEGONDA (*to VIGIL*): Don't—I can handle it myself.

ATTILA: Come here.

ILDEGONDA *stays where she is.*

Are you afraid?

ILDEGONDA: Afraid? Until now, they were afraid of me. (*Approaches.*)

ATTILA (*looks at her*): Yes, I see how one could be afraid of you. I do not know this word: fear. But you are so beautiful it's actually scary.

THE JESTER, ZIRCON: And I, the prince, speak twelve languages.

ATTILA (*without looking away from ILDEGONDA*): Clever! What's next?

ZIRCON: That destiny is in all the languages of womankind.

ATTILA: Destiny? I will bend destiny like a bow, braiding the string from its own hair—my destiny will serve me!

ZIRCON: If you bend, do not bend so far that you burst right out of your forehead...

Dives under the bench. ATTILA takes ILDEGONDA's hand. She pulls her hand away abruptly.

KIRKA (*keeping her eyes on ATTILA all the time, turning pale, gets up*): Prince, allow me to go!

ATTILA (*does not hear, or does not listen. To ILDEGONDA*): I once caught a wolf cub in the forest: now he is tame, and walks at my heels.

ILDEGONDA: Once, in the forest, a wolf attacked me. I buried his bones under a pine tree.

ATTILA: Well said! So!

ILDEGONDA *wants to leave.*

Wait! You are worthy to sit with me. Do you wish to?

ILDEGONDA: No.

ATTILA: Do you understand what I said? Remember: We have a custom...

ILDEGONDA: Yes, I remember.

ATTILA: Then what is your answer?

ILDEGONDA: No.

ATTILA: No? You should tell me yes!

ILDEGONDA: When fluff sinks, when stone floats, then, perhaps, I will.

Moves away from ATTILA.

ZIRCON: The good fellow ate thirty curd pies, but the thirty-first was fish bones!

ATTILA: Will you be silent? (*KIRKA approaches ATTILA, looking at ILDEGONDA.*) Who is she talking to? Who is he?

KIRKA: My prince, allow me to go. No more... I can't... can't...

ATTILA (*does not listen, looks at ILDEGONDA and VIGIL*): Who is he? Who is she talking to?

KIRKA: Her fiancé is an ambassador from Rome.

ATTILA: Her fiancé? Aha. So she is a Roman? I did not know! Well, I love only dead Romans.

ISLA: I recognize this talk: Now Attila is speaking!

ATTILA: Did you like that, old man? Here's another gift for you: Tell her to get lost, and never again appear in my presence. Go!

ISLA *approaches ILDEGONDA, rudely leads her out.*

ONOGOST: Although that's how it seems, it could turn out... otherwise.

ATTILA: Dispense with the riddles—speak straight!

ONOGOST: She is not Roman. Her father, he is the king of the Burgundians.

ATTILA: The she-viper* and the snake are one. The Burgundians are allies of Rome.

ONOGOST: A snake—it is a ring, of course... But so is this (*demonstrates with his hands [slipping a ring onto the fourth finger]*). And if it strikes the heart...

ATTILA (*thoughtful*): What, my heart? Yes... (*Stirring from his reverie.*) Wait... do you hear...? What's that?

ONOGOST (*runs to the window*): Leaving the gate. She's in front. She's turned around... shouting... horses at a gallop. I see no more, the dust is clouding...

ATTILA: Gah! Edecon! Bring her back! Ride—do not spare the horses or yourself.

EDECON: The bird does not exist that can fly away from me. Into my hands as into a trap. But I can't: you see, the ambassadors are waiting.

ATTILA: What do you care about the ambassadors?

EDECON: What do I care? I promised the ambassadors... (*quietly*) to help kill you.

ATTILA: What? Repeat!

EDECON: Kill you.

ATTILA (*silent. Terrible. Smiling*): So that's the kind of ambassadors they send to us! Well, emperor, I'm with you... (*To EDECON.*) Give me an axe! Wait... not yet... Tell me: All three, or just one?

EDECON: One. He will give you a letter.

ATTILA: In that case, we shall welcome our dear guests in order of rank. Onogost, call the ambassadors.

ONOGOST *invites the ambassadors with a gesture.*

MAXIMINUS (*to PRISCUS and VIGIL*): Let's go! (*They approach ATTILA. To ATTILA.*) Lord of Scythia! Our emperor sends you greetings as a brother, from the heart...

ATTILA: From the heart or to the heart?

MAXIMINUS (*confused, stops. Continues*): ...and he wishes you long life.

ATTILA: Oh yes! I know! But tell me exactly how long—not a minute longer do I wish him to live. Do you understand?

* Echidna: a half maiden, half serpent whom the Scythians regarded as their progenitor.

MAXIMINUS (*stopped again. Continues*): In his kindness our emperor gave shelter to the fugitives from Scythia.

ATTILA: Shelter for everyone with Vleda? How good of him!

MAXIMINUS: But you wanted them to be given to you, and we have brought them—to the last man. Do not be harsh with them: warm them, feed them. The emperor beseeches you.

ATTILA: I'm not sorry for them—you will see. (*To EDECON.*) Their friend Vleda's quarters are empty. Take them there... (*To MAXIMINUS.*) Am I not generous? (*To EDECON.*) And with them in those quarters pen five bulls. (*To MAXIMINUS.*) That will be enough, won't it? But you Romans have lost the habit of eating meat raw, like we are on campaign. Well: let's roast the meat. (*To EDECON.*) Surround the whole building with firewood, hammer shut the doors—and set it alight. (*To MAXIMINUS.*) Would you like to go and admire how the emperor's request will be fulfilled?

HORSEMEN, GUARDS: Ha ha! Bourgeois Rome! Right!

MAXIMINUS (*to ATTILA*): You dare scoff at me—at a senator, a Roman ambassador? Then I— (*Taking control of himself, to VIGIL and PRISCUS.*) Let's leave before it's too late. I'm old, but I still have blood in me and I can, I will, forget that I am an ambassador... Let's leave...

VIGIL: Leave? No, I'm not leaving! The emperor gave me a letter, a letter I must deliver. And I will... Let me go! (*Approaches ATTILA.*)

ATTILA (*looking at the slowly approaching VIGIL*): Is that what you have to do? Well, come closer. Closer, to be sure! Here it would be easy. No?

VIGIL (*holds out the letter, hand trembles*): A letter...

ATTILA: And what else? I'm waiting!

VIGIL, *holding the letter in one hand, searches with the other hand for a knife, tangled in the folds of his clothes.* ATTILA *watches.*

ATTILA (*calmly*): Can I help you find your knife?

VIGIL (*confused*): My... knife?

ATTILA: Well, yes—your knife. What are you staring at? After all, did you not want to greet me—with a knife?

KIRKA *rushes between ATTILA and VIGIL.*

HORSEMEN, GUARDS (*surrounding VIGIL on all sides*): With a knife! Arrgh! We'll rip you to shreds! Grind you to dust!

ATTILA: No—tie him up!

MAXIMINUS (*to the ones binding VIGIL*): Don't you dare! He is an ambassador! (*To ATTILA.*) Tell your savages not to dare abuse the ambassador!

ATTILA: Ambassador? He is not an ambassador—he is an assassin. (*To EDECON.*) Speak!

EDECON (*to ATTILA*): The royal eunuch said of you that you are a mad dog, that anyone your saliva sprinkles will rage and tear their masters to shreds. And he said: If I help him (*indicating VIGIL*) kill you, the emperor will send me my weight in gold—and I weigh as much as a good bear. Oho!

MAXIMINUS: Shameless barbarian, you lie!

EDECON: Lie? Oh, you baldheaded fool! Here is a purse—look: the name Vigil is sewn on it. It was he who gave me money to buy the guards.

MAXIMINUS: You stole his wallet!

EDECON (*quickly feeling about, grabs the knife from VIGIL*): And what's that? Aha, he's swallowed his tongue! (*To ATTILA, holding the axe and pointing at VIGIL.*) Will you order it now?

ATTILA: Wait... (*Thinks for a second.*) For this boy, the whip! (*To VIGIL.*) Glorified will you return to the bride... Let her discover how you came to do the deed...

VIGIL: No! No! Not that!

ISLA (*to ATTILA*): You'd better order him to be killed.

ATTILA: Isn't there a great deal of honor in taking a whipping? Besides, he is an ambassador, and the life of an ambassador is sacred. However, if he... (*To VIGIL.*) Do you want death? Say the word—you will die now. No? He is silent. Well, that means... (*To EDECON.*) Lead him...

VIGIL: Damn you!

EDECON puts a hand over his mouth and bustles him out.

ATTILA: Is this how Rome makes peace? A letter in the hands, and a knife behind the back? Ambassadors who hire an assassin? Kill me to shackle the Scythians? (*To MAXIMINUS.*) So let him pray, your emperor! Tell him—let his forehead beat the earth, let him hurry to count his sins: he will not live long—Attila is coming...

MAXIMINUS wants to leave.

Hold him! Listen to the end, so that the Romans know what awaits them!

PRISCUS, *glancing around, stealthily makes his way to the door and exits.*

MAXIMINUS: And I live! Oh, the shame!

ONOGOST (*leading the [other] ambassadors to ATTILA*): Eudoxus is an ambassador from the Gauls.

EUDOXUS: Our forests are full of peasants, slaves, fleeing the Romans. The forest is alive at night: bonfires burn, and they forge swords and pikes, and hatred for Rome in their hearts. Everyone knows you as a friend of the barbarians, and as a storm for the Romans awaiting you...

ATTILA: Tell them the storm is near, and soon the clouds will burst—yes, such a downpour as will wash Rome off the face of the earth!

HORSEMEN and GUARDS: Hurrah! Hurrah!

ONOGOST: The ambassador from our Vandal kinsmen, who forty years ago marched to Hispania with a sword!

AMBASSADOR FROM THE VANDALS: My king Genseric sends me to tell you that he is ready to strike the Romans from the rear—he waits for you.

ATTILA: Say that I have already raised my hammer, and will strike so hard that Europe is left in pieces!

MAXIMINUS: Oh, Rome! My old man Rome—farewell!

ATTILA: Now, herald, blow your trumpet. Blow it to the west, the north, the south, the east, so that everyone from the Vistula to the Volga itself will hear my cry: forward to Rome!

The HERALD trumpets.

ALL: Hurrah! Attila! Attila!

ACT TWO

Inside Aurelianum, besieged by Attila. The crenellated top of the city wall and above it, the upper storey of the tower. The visible part of the (lower) storey of the tower forms a wide stone platform at the level of the wall. The whole city is somewhere below, the dome of a Christian basilica is visible, the roof of some other building.

An old slave, Camel, is chained to the tower, turning a sharpener, sharpening swords. Heard from afar, the sound of battering rams, a dull rumble of battle, shouts, and suddenly a roar: something collapsing. Camel jumps up.

GOUR (*runs onto the platform—to CAMEL, enthusiastically*): Father! Father!
Father!

CAMEL: Gour, is that you? What happened?

GOUR: It collapsed! The north tower has collapsed! Attila has been beating it with rams since this morning—and it collapsed!

CAMEL: So, the last hour has come?

GOUR: Yes, the last hour! But not for you and me, not for slaves, only for them—the Romans, and the king of the Burgundians—that's who! Soon now—I don't know: in half an hour, in a minute—Attila will burst into the city—and then we are free... (*shouts*) Free-ee-ee! You understand?

CAMEL: Shh... shhhh... do not shout: they will hear. They are here... they are here...

GOUR: Who?

CAMEL: The daughter of the king, Ildegonda, and her young Roman with her. Look: there they are, below, they are approaching the tower now.

GOUR: Let them hear. I'm not afraid: it's time for them to fear us.

CAMEL: Mmm, make no mistake. Remember that this very morning the king's herald shouted that, before sunset, Aëtius would come to the rescue with a Roman army.

GOUR: No, Aëtius will not be here in time! There are many of us—like me. I'll go now and raise them all. I know who has the keys to the city gates: the bishop. We will go to him, we...

CAMEL (*looking down*): Shh... they're coming this way—get out quickly. And be careful, be careful! Remember: you're all I have, you alone.

GOUR: And I'm not alone. There are many of us—don't be afraid! (*He exits.*)

CAMEL (*after him*): My Gour... How well he looks now! What a fire in the eyes...

Enter ILDEGONDA and VIGIL.

VIGIL: Ildegonda... what to do—what to do?

ILDEGONDA: Wait... (*Listens. Battering ram.*) There again... do you hear it?

VIGIL: It's a new battering ram, they are hitting somewhere not far away, stones are about to fall—and Attila... (*Battering ram.*)

ILDEGONDA (*listening*): Again! Again! It is he, knocking on my door. He's come for me—I know...!

VIGIL: We are lost.

ILDEGONDA: Not yet. But we are hanging by a thread. Aëtius is near at hand with his army. If he arrives in time, we are saved. If he is late even by a minute— The end...

From behind the wall, shouts from afar: "Arrgh! O-oh!"

VIGIL: What's that? (*Runs up to the battlements of the wall; bending, looks over.*) These are Scythians... They shoot from bows...

ILDEGONDA (*also looking*): They're aiming at you... get away! Vigil! Vigil!

VIGIL recoils from the wall. An arrow sticks out of his shoulder. He yanks it out and slowly sinks to the ground.

ILDEGONDA: Vigil! I'm here with you! Can you hear me? It's me! Open your eyes! (*Tries to pick him up.*) Who's there? Here, hurry! (*Camel runs up, clinking his chain.*) Hurry... help me unbutton... Raise his... and take off... Now this...

They take off VIGIL'S outer clothing, begin to unbutton the underclothes. VIGIL comes to his senses. CAMEL returns to his seat.

ILDEGONDA: He's alive! He's awake...! Vigil!

VIGIL (*pushes her away and, putting his clothes back on, jumps up*): Did you see? Did you see? Speak!

ILDEGONDA: Did I see what?

VIGIL: The marks on my body... Did you see them? Speak!

ILDEGONDA: What marks? Wait, let me bandage the wound...

VIGIL (*drawing his sword*): Get back! Don't touch me!

ILDEGONDA: Come to your senses, what's wrong with you? Tell me, what's the matter—what are you afraid of? What marks do you mean?

VIGIL (*lowering the sword*): N-not about... any... I... don't know... don't remember.

From behind the wall, distant shouts: "Attila! Attila!" VIGIL grabs ILDEGONDA'S hand.

VIGIL: Do you hear—they're shouting "Attila"!

ILDEGONDA (*looking over the wall*): He's going to attack...

VIGIL: Ildegonda... If it happens that we are taken alive as prisoners...

ILDEGONDA: No!

VIGIL: ...I beg you, promise me that you will not believe his words, that you won't listen to him, that you'll forget what he says...

ILDEGONDA: What are you talking about? I don't understand... You have to explain to me...

VIGIL *hurries off*.

Where are you...? Wait—you're hurt.

VIGIL: The arrow only grazed me. They're expecting me... I can't...

He runs offstage.

WARRIOR OF BURGUNDY (*enters*): The king, your father, ordered me to convey to you his last greetings.

ILDEGONDA: Is he slain?

WARRIOR OF BURGUNDY: He still lives, but he is now fighting at the wall, from which no one will leave alive. Attila himself is there, at the head of his army. Just as a storm blows the waves up with its breath until it crushes everything in its path, so is he. What can we do against the storm?

ILDEGONDA: Go... Wait. Tell the king that if he is destined to die, let him remember, my knife is always with me.

The WARRIOR OF BURGUNDY exits. Battering ram.

ILDEGONDA (*listening*): The knocking gets louder and louder, Attila grows closer and closer.

BISHOP ANNIAN (*enters. ILDEGONDA is in despair*): I love them... because they are alive... Do you understand? Alive! They speak! I can hear their voices!

ILDEGONDA: Whose voices?

BISHOP ANNIAN: My books... eleven thousand books! Look: This is Caesar's manuscript, Gaius Julius Caesar!

ILDEGONDA: Well, what of it?

BISHOP ANNIAN: What do you mean, "what of it"? They rushed in, scattered all my books...

ILDEGONDA: Who burst in?

BISHOP ANNIAN: Slaves, soldiers... they were looking for my keys, the keys to the city gates, to open the gates to Attila. They were right on my heels, soon they will be here... here: do you hear me?

Shouts of the approaching CROWD.

ILDEGONDA: Wait... Let me come to my senses... Like angry birds, troubles have flocked in from everywhere, pecking. (*Pauses, then*) No, I won't give up! Listen, bishop: Tell them that Aëtius is coming, that he is close, he will be here...

BISHOP ANNIAN: They don't want to wait.

ILDEGONDA: So make them!

BISHOP ANNIAN: How?

ILDEGONDA: Threats, flattery, miracles, whatever you want! Do you have the keys?

BISHOP ANNIAN: Yes, here they are.

ILDEGONDA: Hide them away.

BISHOP ANNIAN: They're coming...

ILDEGONDA: Play your part! I'll wait for you—over there... And remember: Not a single word of yours will escape me—I will hear everything.

She hides behind the tower on the other side of the platform. The shouts of the CROWD grow louder. GOUR runs up to BISHOP ANNIAN, followed by several more slaves and soldiers. Two or three of the CROWD appear on the roof of the building. The rest of the CROWD is below; you can only hear them.

CAMEL (*looking down at GOUR ascending the steps*): It is he! He—my Gour—ahead of everyone!

GOUR (*to BISHOP ANNIAN*): Aha, there you are, monk! The keys! The keys!

VOICES BELOW: The keys! The keys!

SOLDIER ON THE ROOF: We are Burgundians, why the hell should we die for Rome?

VOICES BELOW: Right! Right! The keys! The keys!

BISHOP ANNIAN: Citizens of Aurelianum! Let me say one last thing. Then I will yield to your wishes... (*The CROWD falls silent.*) Look! Here! Do you see this parchment? It is priceless. Thousands of such ancient, precious books...

GOUR: Are you talking about books again? We're human: understand? We want to live!

BISHOP ANNIAN: No, you want everyone to perish! You endured a siege for a whole month—and all of a sudden at the last hour you want to surrender! At the hour when help is about to come to us, when Aëtius is, perhaps, very close at hand.

GOUR: Do not believe him, he is lying—Aëtius is far away. But Attila is close—our Attila!

VOICES BELOW: Attila! Attila!

GOUR: No talking—give over the keys!

VOICES: The keys! The keys!

The sound of a Roman buccina is heard.

BISHOP ANNIAN: Wait... (*Triumphant.*) Do you hear? They are trumpeting! There! Do you recognize the sound of Roman trumpets? Holy Virgin, bless you, you have performed a miracle. It is he—Aëtius! (*To GOUR.*) Well now, did I lie? Nothing to say? Someone hurry up the tower, quite likely from there the Romans are already visible!

SOLDIER ON THE ROOF: I'll go. And if it's Aëtius... (*Comes down from the roof.*)

GOUR (*desperately*): No! No! I don't believe it!

VOICE ON THE ROOF: What if it's true? Look: He's at the top. He's looking, he's probably seen... He will speak now! Hush!

BISHOP ANNIAN (*to the SOLDIER on the tower*): Have you seen? The Romans are coming, right?

SOLDIER: Yes, the Romans...

BISHOP ANNIAN (*lovingly, to the parchment*): O! You are saved... saved!

SOLDIER: But these Romans are shackled, they're in chains, driven to the wall by the Huns to tease us.

BISHOP ANNIAN *covers his face*.

GOUR: Deceiver! Kill the monk! Kill!

They surround BISHOP ANNIAN. His raised hand with the parchment is visible above their heads.

ILDEGONDA (*running out of the tower*): Stop!

BISHOP ANNIAN: My books! My bo-... (*Falls under the blows.*)

SOLDIER (*picking up the keys*): Here they are—the keys!

VOICES: The keys! Hurry to the gate! Attila! Attila!

ILDEGONDA: Villains! The king will order you all...

GOUR: It is not the king who gives orders now, but I.

ILDEGONDA: O-oh, you?

VOICES: Gour speaks for us! Lead us!

GOUR: Go, I will follow you, only I must untie my father's chain...

VOICES: Long live Attila! Attila! Attila! (*They leave.*)

CAMEL (*admiring GOUR—enthusiastically*): My Gour! My Gour!

GOUR: Put your foot here, hurry.

CAMEL: You were born to lead the people.

GOUR: It is as if I have grown wings—now I will fly...

Bending down, he begins to free CAMEL from the chain. ILDEGONDA comes up behind him, draws her knife.

ILDEGONDA (*stabbing GOUR*): Then fly, vile slave, traitor!

CAMEL: My boy! (*Grabs a sword from one of the piles and throws himself at ILDEGONDA.*) Damn you!

The chain prevents him from reaching ILDEGONDA, who has retreated a few steps.

A-ah... I can't... She's gone... (*Towards ILDEGONDA.*) All the same: you won't get away—get away—get away from me! Remember!

ILDEGONDA, on the other side of the tower, sinks exhaustedly onto a stone bench. Knife in hand, looks at it motionlessly. MARULLUS appears.

MARULLUS: Ildegonda, I've been searching for you everywhere... Hide me, hide me!

She stays in the same position.

Don't you recognize me? I am Marullus, the court poet, I have composed odes in honor of the king, your father, and in honor of you, so many times.

ILDEGONDA (*coming to*): Have you seen my father? You've seen him? How is he?

MARULLUS: I saw how that wild beast—Attila—shot an arrow at him. Your father fell dead... Hide me!

ILDEGONDA: So Attila has killed my father? Good! I won't forget!

MARULLUS: Hide me!

ILDEGONDA: Get out of here!

MARULLUS hides behind a tower ledge. The shouts and the battle song of the Huns are heard nearby.

ILDEGONDA (*listening*): These are the Huns! It's them! It's him!

VIGIL (*runs in*): The gates were opened to them... He is here! Attila is here! Ildegonda, it's all over...

ILDEGONDA: No. Hurry, before it's too late—to the tower... maybe they won't find us there. The iron door is strong, maybe Aëtius will have time...

VIGIL: And if not?

ILDEGONDA: Then we will get ready... to die...

She runs past CAMEL, who overheard their conversation, and down the steps. MARULLUS writes hastily.

CAMEL: So! Wolves in a trap... (*Bending over GOUR.*) You won't have to wait long now... they are in a trap, in a trap, in a trap...!

From the opposite side, ATTILA ascends the platform by the tower, with ISLA, EDECON, ZIRCON, and two or three WARRIORS.

ISLA: Well, now, Aurelianus is at our feet: admire it! Why are you so quiet? Where are you looking? As if you are still searching for an enemy?

ATTILA: You're right: I am searching.

ISLA: For whom?

MARULLUS (*emerges*): Attila, it's you! I've been searching for you everywhere!

ATTILA: What for?

MARULLUS: Just to say hello, to you, godlike Attila... But what am I saying? In front of you, the gods are children!

ZIRCON sweeps a bat before MARULLUS.

ATTILA (*to ZIRCON*): What are you up to, fool?

ZIRCON: Why don't you see—he will crawl on his belly so as not to get dirty... (*Laughter.*)

ATTILA: Leave... (*To MARULLUS.*) What else do you say?

MARULLUS: I have written an ode. Allow me to read it—then I can die in peace.

ATTILA: To die in peace—well, read.

MARULLUS: Rome, tremble! Do you hear the bang, do you hear the boom, do you hear the clatter from the East? We the Huns are mighty, rushing to the West like a storm... We the Huns are...

ATTILA: Tell me, since when have you been a Hun?

MARULLUS: Why, since today... No: yesterday... But what am I saying?—about a week ago!

ATTILA: Then you are an old Hun. We need Huns like you... (*To EDECON.*) Send him to battle against the Romans tomorrow, right at the front. Let him show himself there.

MARULLUS *backs up and runs away.*

ZIRCON: Aha, his stomach got him!

WARRIORS: Ock...! Ha...! Ho...! Hoo-hoo! (*They run after MARULLUS.*)

ATTILA: Leave him! You already have plenty of lice—do you want to catch one more? Let's go.

CAMEL: Wait! Don't leave!

ATTILA: What do you want? Who are you?

CAMEL: A Roman slave.

ATTILA: It's time to forget what you were. Stand up, old man! (*To one of the WARRIORS.*) Unchain him.

CAMEL: That my son cannot see this... What for? How he loved you, how he waited! And now, look— He waited...

ATTILA: Slain? Tell me, who killed him?

CAMEL: Promise me his killer, so that I can, myself—with this hand here... Do you promise? You, Attila?

ATTILA: Yes, I promise. You will have his killer—who is he?

CAMEL: She. She is here—in this tower.

ATTILA: Speak quickly: who is it?

CAMEL: Ildegonda.

ATTILA (*grabbing CAMEL*): You said... Ildegonda? There?

CAMEL: Yes...

ATTILA: In this tower? The door... where is the door?

CAMEL: The iron door is below.

ATTILA (*shouts down*): It's me, it's me—Attila! Break down the doors to the tower, look lively! Axes! Ram! (*To everyone.*) Behind me!

Everyone exits quickly. The only one remaining is the WARRIOR freeing CAMEL.

CAMEL: Now, Gour... now... lie still. Another minute, and they are finished, finished, finished!

Exits together with Attila's WARRIOR.

VOICES BELOW: O-oh! Hit! Arrgh! (*Axe blows.*)

On the tower, at the very top, ILDEGONDA and VIGIL appear.

VIGIL: They know we're here—they know! They're hitting the door with axes—do you hear it?

ILDEGONDA: As long as the door holds, there is hope...

VIGIL: From below you can see... Let's get out of here!

ILDEGONDA: Here or there, it's all equal. There's nowhere to go.

VIGIL: Look, they are carrying the ram!

ILDEGONDA: A ram? Then we are finished... Just another minute... Attila will burst in...

VIGIL: I know he will tell you... but you won't believe him, will you? Promise!

ILDEGONDA: What are you talking about? Tell me before it's too late.

VIGIL: Me... myself? Never! I'd rather die!

VOICES BELOW: Hit! Hoy! Urragh!

A blow. A cracking sound.

ILDEGONDA: It's time... here... take it! (*Gives him her knife.*)

VIGIL: What are you—? What do you want?

ILDEGONDA: Do you love me? Yes? Then put the knife in my heart. You made it beat, and you will stop it.

VIGIL: No!

Below: a blow, a crack.

ILDEGONDA (*revealing herself*): Give me your hand... do you recognize my breast? Do you want another to touch me like this? You see the tent in the night... white knees in the dark... it is me, on Attila's bed...

VIGIL: Give me the knife! (*Raises it. Lowers it.*) No!

Below: a blow, a crack, something falls.

VIGIL (*looking down*): They've burst in! Ildegonda...

ILDEGONDA: Now I will learn from Attila the whole truth about you...

VIGIL: No! You will not know! (*Raises the knife.*) The eyes... I can't... avert your gaze! Now—goodbye...

ATTILA, EDECON, ISLA, CAMEL, *and several* SCYTHIAN WARRIORS
rush to the top of the tower.

ATTILA: Arrgh, arrgh—there they are!

OTHERS: Arrgh!

A short fight. VIGIL tries to defend himself with the knife. EDECON disarms him, binds his arms with a belt, puts the knife in the belt.

EDECON (*to VIGIL with mockery*): Hold it tight, it will come in handy: I will feel your heart with this knife.

VIGIL: You are... a vile traitor! A butcher!

EDECON: Am I? I'll stop that mouth (*gags him with a flap of his clothes. To ATTILA, who is holding ILDEGONDA.*) Let's bind the girl!

ATTILA (*without answering him, to ILDEGONDA*): When you stand like this, gritting your teeth, and hurling your eyes at me like spears, you are even more beautiful—do you know that?

ILDEGONDA *tries to wriggle free.*

What for? You are mine all the same. If I want to, I will see all of you.

ILDEGONDA: You killed my father... beware...

ATTILA: Hah! Am I supposed to be afraid of you?

EDECON (*raising his axe*): Give her to me... let's end this business.

CAMEL: She is mine! He promised her to me!

ISLA (*looking down, to ATTILA*): Finish her quickly. It's time! Something is happening in the city. They're shouting and running this way...

EDECON (*with axe raised over ILDEGONDA, to ATTILA*): Your command!

A SCYTHIAN WARRIOR (*out of breath, runs up the tower*): Aëtius...! Aëtius! Romans.

CAMEL (*to ATTILA*): She is mine! You promised!

ATTILA (*to CAMEL*): Quiet! Now there is neither you nor her: There are only the Romans and me... (*Pushes ILDEGONDA aside.*)

ISLA: There's the prince! Here—now—it's you!

ATTILA (*to ISLA*): Get everyone out of the city—quickly!

ISLA: What, leave?

ATTILA: We will not fight in a cage, but in the field! On the Catalaunian Plains, tomorrow we will meet with Aëtius. Rome—or us!

They exit, taking VIGIL and ILDEGONDA away. For a moment, the stage is empty. One can hear measured stomping, the blast of buccinas. Then a CENTURION appears on the platform, with him several ROMAN SOLDIERS. They see the corpse of BISHOP ANNIAN.

CENTURION (*shouting below*): Aëtius—here, up here!

AËTIUS (*[enters,] leans over the corpse of BISHOP ANNIAN*): What? Bishop Annian? Slain?

CENTURION: And the king. Ildegonda is in captivity.

AËTIUS: We are too late...

ACT THREE

Night, after the Battle of the Catalaunian Fields. Attila's camp. Rough Scythian carts, covered with oak [branches], placed in a circle. To the fore, with a closed curtain, is Attila's tent. EDECON stands on guard with an axe in front of the tent. Enter ATTILA.

EDECON (*rushes to him, feeling him over, rubs his head, growling happily like a big dog*): Ghoo-oo-oo? Ghoo-oo-oo!

ATTILA: What's this about?

EDECON: You are back alive, alive! I've been standing and thinking: well, how is it going to go... And here you are—alive! (*Takes a shield from ATTILA, peers at it.*) Blood... Someone else's, or yours?

ATTILA: I do not know. Is Ildegonda there? (*He points to the tent.*)

EDECON: Yes.

ATTILA: Has she spoken to you?

EDECON: No, she is silent. I only asked about him once.

ATTILA: About whom?

EDECON: About Vigil. I joked that I chopped off his head with an axe.

ATTILA: And she?

EDECON: Silent as the earth, as the night.

ATTILA: Hmm. Have you seen Isla or Onogost?

EDECON: No.

ATTILA: I lost them in the dark. I don't know if they survived the battle, or died. If they are alive, tell them to come here.

EDECON *exits. Emerging from the darkness, CAMEL appears not far from*
ATTILA.

ATTILA: Who are you? Come closer. Hmm... I've seen you somewhere before... Where?

CAMEL: At the tower in Aurelianum... or have you forgotten? You promised me then...

ATTILA: Quiet! Go away! I remember: satisfied?

CAMEL: I'll wait...

He steps aside and, with the distance growing all the time, follows ATTILA like a shadow.

ISLA and ONOGOST (*enter*): Life and health!

ATTILA: So you're intact? Well, first—first tell me who: they or we? Who: Rome or the Scythians—whose is the victory? For whom are the Catalaunian Fields?

ISLA: I will never see another fight like it. By sunset, it looked like a reaper had crossed the field. The people were like sheaves, their heads the ears, and the sun was a head, covered in blood—slowly sinking. Then darkness. Where was the enemy? Everything was confused, you couldn't see. At once, the battle subsided. The Romans withdrew to their camp, and we returned to ours.

ATTILA: So who won? Who!

ONOGOST: Try striking the board of that bilo*: the board will swing, and the bilo will rebound, back and forth. That's what it's like.

ATTILA: No, it's not like that! You've gone blind. Don't you see: the board and the bilo, the West and the East, the Empire and us—a mortal confrontation, and one or the other will smash to pieces!

ONOGOST: Aëtius there... smash him to pieces...

ATTILA: Aëtius is just across the road! There was a rumor that he was wounded. You don't know if it's true, do you?

ONOGOST (*confidently*): Yes, he's wounded. I know very well!

ATTILA: Where?

ONOGOST: Where? Uh... uh... uh... (*Hastily pokes himself in the eye, neck, chest.*) Ehm... here (*pointing to the navel*)—in the eye...

ATTILA: Liar! Be silent.

ISLA: Do you hear that?

ATTILA: The wind? I hear it howling.

ISLA: No, there by the Romans. Listen: There it is again.

Funeral chants and screams are heard from afar.

* An instrument consisting of a wooden board or metal plate struck with a mallet. In English, the bilo is known as a semantron or xylon.

ATTILA: Fun at a funeral? Crying and singing... What could that mean?
You don't know?

ISLA: No.

EDECON (*enters, leading a bound ETHIOPIAN*): Here is a captive. Where do you want him?

ATTILA: A captive? I said not to take captives!

EDECON: And I didn't. This one stumbled on us in the dark, like a fly into kvass*.

ATTILA (*taking a look at the ETHIOPIAN*): From Roman Africa, it appears.

EDECON: An Ethiopian.

THE ETHIOPIAN (*speaks badly*): Yes, yes. I—Rome no...

ATTILA: Well, soon the Romans will drive these monkeys on us... (*To EDECON.*) Take him away and feed him.

More chanting and crying.

Again? (*To EDECON.*) Wait a minute. (*To the ETHIOPIAN.*) Do you hear? They're singing over there. They're burying the dead—do you understand that: de-ead?

THE ETHIOPIAN: Dead... yes, yes (*closing his eyes, he puts his cheek on his palm*).

ATTILA: Exactly. So who died? Have you heard? Do you know who?

THE ETHIOPIAN: Most biggest... their most biggest... Yes, yes!

ATTILA: Aëtius?

THE ETHIOPIAN: Yes, yes! Yes, yes!

ATTILA (*excitedly*): You hear? Aëtius is dead! No one can save Rome now. Victory is ours! We won!

EDECON: Hurrah! Aëtius is dead! Hurr... (*Choked under ATTILA'S gaze.*)

ATTILA: Show some respect! The last true Roman has died... My most worthy enemy and friend.

ISLA (*listening*): The howling's getting louder...

ONOGOST: Look, look... They lit a fire. Let's go and see.

ISLA and ONOGOST exit.

ATTILA (*to EDECON*): Move away a bit and stay there. And see that no one, no one dares to enter... understand?

* A fermented drink made from rye bread.

EDECON *departs*. ATTILA *draws the curtain of the tent, enters*.

ILDEGONDA (*staggering back*): You?

ATTILA: Yes, me. You and me. We are together for the first time—alone at last.

ILDEGONDA: Why did you come?

ATTILA: To say, there is no more—he is dead... (*Joyfully*.) You hear—he is dead!

ILDEGONDA: He was killed, you mean! You ordered his head removed with an axe... (*Stops*.)

ATTILA: Who are you talking about? Aëtius is dead, and they are burying him now. Bonfires are lit, there is singing... Victory is ours now, I know it! Now I will plow the whole world, plow it deep with the sword! And the seeds that sprout will be unprecedented, new, mine! Like wine, I am drunk with victory—I am full of it—I want just one thing: get on the bed quickly, and get me drunk on you, so that life is over the edge, so that it is like a flood—eh-eh!

He tries to embrace Ildegonda.

ILDEGONDA: You killed my father, you killed Vigil—don't come near!

ATTILA: Vigil? Are you talking about him? Do you still love him? So I was wrong: you're not proud at all. Or have you already forgotten about his feat when he was an ambassador? A feat about which poets will not sing, but fools in caps...

ILDEGONDA: Feat? Fools...? What do you mean?

ATTILA: Aha, that explains it! He concealed it—didn't tell you—got cold feet. Are you turning pale? I see I've hit the mark! Well, this will be fun. (*To EDECON*.) Bring Vigil!

ILDEGONDA: Vi... Vigil? He's alive! Speak!

ATTILA: He'll tell you himself... just wait.

EDECON *ushers in* VIGIL.

ILDEGONDA: Vigil!

VIGIL: You! Ildegonda is mine!

ATTILA: No, she is mine! (*To EDECON*.) Stand there between them. Well, Roman, it's time to pay your debts. Now you will recount everything, as it was.

VIGIL (*terrified*): In front of her? No! Have mercy!

EDECON: Ha! This little carp hopped right into the frying pan!

ILDEGONDA: Vigil!

ATTILA (*to VIGIL*): Nothing to say? All right, I'll start the story...

VIGIL: No!

ATTILA (*not listening*): He came to me in ambassador's clothes, hiring assassins to kill me. Was it so?

VIGIL: Yes.

ILDEGONDA: How easy it becomes for me... (*To ATTILA*.) He would have rid the world of a plague, a monster—of you! Vigil, I love you even more...

ATTILA: Not so hasty, this tale isn't over yet. I gave him a choice: either death, or—hmm... No, you won't believe me. Let him finish it himself. (*To VIGIL*.) Still nothing to say? Once again I give you the choice: this axe (*indicates EDECON'S axe*) or you tell all.

VIGIL (*with excruciating effort*): I choose... then... (*Pauses*.)

ATTILA: Well, you're getting bolder! I see he will tell us this time. (*To EDECON*.) He knows, your axe is not a joke...

VIGIL: I... I...

ILDEGONDA (*cutting him off*): Vigil! Stop!

ONOGOST *is approaching the tent, with him a ROMAN in a cloak and helmet, pulled down low.*

They stop at the entrance to the tent, waiting for ATTILA to finish.

ATTILA (*to ILDEGONDA*): Take a good look: His head in is your hands.

ILDEGONDA *involuntarily looks at her hands.*

His head... (*Meaning VIGIL*.) Do you understand me? If you desire it, he will live. If you don't desire it—it's up to you.

ILDEGONDA (*to VIGIL slowly*): If what you're going to say... if it... Look me in the eye...

VIGIL *does not look up.*

(*Decisively*.) No—don't speak! Don't speak! Don't speak!

ATTILA: So you've decided? (*To VIGIL*.) And you, decided? Edecon, take him away! He is yours, and as soon as dawn breaks... Understand?

EDECON: Eh... the same moment?

Leads VIGIL away. The ROMAN, brought by ONOGOST, follows VIGIL with his eyes.

ATTILA (*to ILDEGONDA*): Well, listen. I'll recount it for him, believe it if you want, if you don't want to—don't believe it. He chose to be whipped, when he could have chosen to die.

ILDEGONDA: You're lying!

ATTILA: Maybe.

ILDEGONDA: So those are the marks on his body he was talking about... So that's why he didn't want to show me the wound...

ATTILA: Oho, so you do believe me?

ILDEGONDA: No... yes... Damn you, Hun! You poured poison into my love—but I'm still alive... Beware!

ATTILA: You beware: I will return...

Closes the curtain, goes out of the tent.

ONOGOST (*to* ATTILA): A defector from the Romans—he wants to talk to you.

ATTILA: Hmm. And what else?

ONOGOST: The kill counters have returned from the field.

ATTILA: And, how many? (*To the ROMAN.*) Wait.

ONOGOST (*of the ROMAN*): In front of him?

ATTILA: Is it not all the same? We won.

ONOGOST: I don't know. Exactly one hundred thousand lie at rest in that field—theirs and ours.

ATTILA: One hundred thousand of ours? (*He is silent.*) But one Aëtius is worth a hundred thousand. I am at peace. With Aëtius dead, Rome is without a head.

THE ROMAN: Aëtius is dead...?

ATTILA (*to the ROMAN*): What? You don't know about that? Strange! Who are you?

THE ROMAN: Who I am, I will tell you in private.

ATTILA (*to* ONOGOST): Leave us!

ONOGOST *exits*. *The ROMAN parts his cloak, raises his helmet. It is AËTIUS.*

ATTILA: Aëtius—is it you?

AËTIUS: Yes, it is I.

ATTILA: And you are... alive?

AËTIUS: As you see.

ATTILA: But I myself heard the funeral chorus weeping for you, and the captive told us...

AËTIUS: The King of the Visigoths, Theodoric, died of his wounds. It was he who was buried, while I—forgive me!—what can I do?—am still alive.

ATTILA (*furious*): You laugh at me... you dare? Did you hear me talking about you? I can repeat it: you are worth one hundred thousand, and with one blow of the sword, one hundred thousand heads are off their shoulders! Take a sword, defend yourself!

ATTILA *unfastens the sword on his right side and throws it at AËTIUS, then draws a second sword from its scabbard on the left and attacks.*

AËTIUS, *without picking up the sword, retreats.*

ATTILA: Are you afraid of my sword? Run away... Coward!

AËTIUS (*in one leap he grabs the sword, draws it, and drops it again*): A long time ago you gave me shelter; I cannot raise my hand against you. If you can kill me, kill me! I will not move.

ATTILA (*swings his sword, hesitates, lowers it*): Forgive me, give me your hand. I'm glad you're alive—I have not forgotten how you saved my life in battle. Tell me, why did you come to me?

AËTIUS: You know yourself: the "victory" has been a draw. Don't scowl; you know I'm right. So I came to propose we go home, and you, and I, will leave before it's too late.

ATTILA: What? Should I go now? Go away and leave the world as it was?

AËTIUS: Is not the world beautiful as it is? Come to Rome with me—you will see: under the blue sky there are white palaces, in the palaces, poets, flutes, purple garments, laughter, wine, lights, paintings, books, marble... Under purple canvas, Rome sails like a galley full of treasures, and you want to sink her?

ATTILA: You are only looking up, at the sails: look down! Take a look and you will see—eyes sparkling with wolfish light, and people in chains, like dogs, like animals, rowing all their lives, bent over... But of course, they are not Romans, not people—therefore, why talk about them!

AËTIUS: No, indeed: let us talk about people. It is not I who has forgotten them, but you! One hundred thousand already lie dead out there, hearts stilled, breaths cut off, eyes empty, fathers, husbands, one hundred thousand lives—or is that not enough? Do you require millions of them?

ATTILA: No, I want everyone to live.

AËTIUS: So, you agree to make peace?

ATTILA: Not until the war's end. You heard me: I want everyone to live. Now your hundred thousand Romans live, while millions are taken to the galleys who die there, below... You understand... I want them to live, too.

AËTIUS: Is that your answer?

ATTILA: Yes.

AËTIUS: So be it, then. We will meet in battle...

ATTILA: Farewell!

In the distance, vague shouting.

Wait, something is wrong... The camp is awake and shouting...

ONOGOST (*entering*): Well, they've lost it! It's gotten into their heads that Aëtius is here, in our camp... I tried everything, but it's no good. You better go calm them down.

ATTILA: I'll be right there...

Onogost exits.

(*To AËTIUS.*) Here is my ring: everyone knows it. Whoever shows it will be allowed to pass... Go immediately.

He exits. CAMEL follows him like a shadow. AËTIUS draws the curtain of the tent. CAMEL comes back and hides near the tent.

ILDEGONDA: Aëtius, how did you get here?

AËTIUS (*hastily*): Here is Attila's ring. You will be allowed to pass with it, they will let you through. Put on my cloak and run, quickly, before he returns.

CAMEL, *leaning out, listening, jumps in place, knife in hand.*

ILDEGONDA (*puts on the cloak, hesitates*): No, you take it. (*She gives the ring and cloak to AËTIUS.*) I will not leave before Attila has paid in full for what he's done, to me, to my father, to Vigil, to Rome.

AËTIUS: He will come back and take you to his bed. After all, you are unarmed. He is stronger...

ILDEGONDA: Is the snake unarmed? I will become a snake and split in two, my tongue will be a serpent's tongue. I will squeeze out of myself a poison smile... I will be able to deceive him...

CAMEL *goes back into hiding.*

AËTIUS (*seeing ATTILA in the distance—to ILDEGONDA*): Attila! Speak quickly: do you want Vigil to live—or to die?

ILDEGONDA: To... No! Oh, that he was silent! To live...! Wait!

AËTIUS *draws the curtain and leaves quickly. Nearing the tent is* ATTILA, *in front of him,* CAMEL.

CAMEL: Wait a moment, there's something you need to kn—

ATTILA (*threatening*): Get away from me. Do you hear?

CAMEL *steps aside.* ATTILA *enters the tent.*

ILDEGONDA: Is Vigil still alive?

ATTILA (*sternly*): Yes, but he will die. Soon.

ILDEGONDA: The sooner the better. Say it will be now!

ATTILA: I said it will be at dawn.

ILDEGONDA: I do not want him to live another minute! To think that I once loved him?

ATTILA (*changing tone, slightly*): And now?

ILDEGONDA: I hate him!

ATTILA: And love? I know this feeling.

ILDEGONDA: As do I.

ATTILA: You do? (*Peers sharply.*) Enough. Lie down!

CAMEL *inches closer to the tent.*

ILDEGONDA: Do you want to make me hate you?

ATTILA: I expect nothing else. I'm not blind.

ILDEGONDA: What if...?

ATTILA: You twisting snake, you lie!

ILDEGONDA (*with a threat*): Just try it, believe me...

ATTILA: Are you threatening or asking?

ILDEGONDA: Can't you hear? Or do you not yet understand: only two are equal—you and I.

ATTILA: And you and I are enemies. Rome and you are one for me.

ILDEGONDA: One? Is that so? And if I tell you that I want to sit next to you?

ATTILA: How can that be? What's happened?

ILDEGONDA: What has happened, is that I have learned that Vigil was like a rotten splinter. I have taken him out of my heart. Understand?

ATTILA (*to her*): Then allow me...

ILDEGONDA: No!

ATTILA: No?

ILDEGONDA: I don't want to be a concubine: I want to be your wife!
When you and I celebrate our wedding...

ATTILA: Then?

ILDEGONDA: Then I'll hug you until you choke, I'll kiss you until you burn!

ATTILA (*silently, gazing intently at ILDEGONDA. Then*): If that is so, then I swear to you, no matter what happens, for better or worse, you will be my wife. My word is as strong as a sword.

ILDEGONDA: I know.

CAMEL, *entering the tent, touches ATTILA on the shoulder.*

ATTILA (*turning around, furiously*): You again? You will wait for me...

CAMEL: You put a snake in your bed.

ATTILA: You dare?

CAMEL: When you left, I heard her speak with that Roman...

ATTILA: What? Speak!

CAMEL: She told him that she would be able to deceive you, that she would... (*He breaks off under ATTILA'S gaze.*)

ATTILA (*turning to ILDEGONDA*): Aha. So? (*Slowly draws his sword from its sheath, looking at ILDEGONDA.*)

CAMEL: No, you promised me.

ATTILA: Take her!

CAMEL *draws a knife.*

Not here, take her away...

ILDEGONDA (*to ATTILA*): Is this how you keep your word? You just swore to me—or have you forgotten?—that no matter what happened, for better or worse...

ATTILA: Be quiet!

CAMEL: You promised me!

ATTILA (*silent. Then, to CAMEL*): Stay here. But if you lay a finger on her... Do you hear?

CAMEL: Yes.

ATTILA *goes out of the tent. He stands outside, breathing heavily. Not far is a huge stone.*

ATTILA (*going up to the stone*): You won't move? Move! You won't move? Move! (*He adjusts his grip and puts his shoulder to the stone. It lurches.*) Is what is in me harder?

THE JESTER, ZIRCON (*enters, looks on silently, approaches*): What, did that stone want to be moved?

ATTILA: I will move it.

ZIRCON: And what about yourself? Are you caught?

ATTILA: You are the wisest of us all, so listen: my heart is cut in half, two hearts are beating in me now, and each heart is the enemy of the other. One wants to kill...

ZIRCON: And the other wants to embrace.

ATTILA (*pointing to ILDEGONDA and CAMEL in the tent*): I gave her my word just now that she would be my wife, and I gave him my word...

ZIRCON: Yes, with me. I remember. And you, like Onogost a moment ago, have done everything...

ATTILA: What then?

ZIRCON: Let her become your wife, then give her over to him you promised.

ATTILA: After I'm done with her?

ZIRCON: Yes. (*Pointing at the stone.*) The question is... after that, will you have strength enough to move it?

ATTILA (*frowning, silent. Then*): Call Isla... (*Going over to the tent.*) Come out!

ILDEGONDA and CAMEL *come out*. ZIRCON *brings* ISLA.

ATTILA (*to ISLA, of ILDEGONDA*): You will send her home for me at once. And let everyone prepare—for the wedding.

ISLA (*dumbfounded*): What?

ATTILA: You heard me. Do as I say!

CAMEL: And I?

ATTILA: You will have her, after...

CAMEL: I'll wait.

ATTILA (*to ILDEGONDA*): Well, dear bride, farewell. You will receive quite a wedding present from me.

VOICES (*from afar*): O-oh! Rshch! O-oh! Rshch!

ATTILA: Now what? (EDECON *runs up. To him.*) By the way. See? It is dawn. Go to him, end it—and send his head...

EDECON: Whose head?

ATTILA (*loudly*): Who do think? Vigil's!

ILDEGONDA *shudders. Shouts are heard in the distance.*

EDECON: That's him now... there—do you hear?

ATTILA (*furiously*): What? Well?

EDECON: Don't be angry: they'll catch him yet...

ATTILA (*even more furiously*): How did he escape?

ONOGOST (*climbing onto a cart, looking*): Look, there he is, there he is!

EDECON (*to ATTILA*): Didn't you let him go yourself?

ATTILA: I? Him? Have you gone mad?

EDECON: He showed your ring to the sentry.

ATTILA: I didn't give the ring to him.

EDECON: To whom, then?

ATTILA: To Aë... And this Roman defector, where is he?

EDECON: He got the sentry in the belly, and disappeared without a trace.

ATTILA: So they're both gone? Catch up with them both! In pieces!

EDECON *runs off*.

VOICES (*somewhere below*): O-oh! Arrgh! Rshch! Here! Ooga! Ooga!

ATTILA (*to ONOGOST*): Now what? What is it? Speak!

ONOGOST (*from the cart, watching the chase*): Left! Left! There! There!

ATTILA: Do you hear? Answer me! Are you deaf?

ONOGOST: There—there—you can barely see him! It looks like Vigil.
Or no—there's another... it is Vigil...! No...

ILDEGONDA *is on the sidelines, listening intently*.

ATTILA (*stomps*): You blind owl! Who is it?

ONOGOST: There we are, they've got up—they're grabbing... Yes, on top, on top! Not that way! Eh, he broke free! Right through the fingers. Well, that's it!

ATTILA: What? What?

ONOGOST: They've been picked up by Romans... They're on horseback now... That's it... both of them... Done! They won't catch up!

ILDEGONDA (*to ISLA, aside*): Let's go now.

ATTILA: So long, my bride. Expect me soon. You and I are not finished yet...

ILDEGONDA: Not finished—no, not at all!

ACT FOUR

Attila's chamber. The same as in the first act, or a different one. Wedding feast. There is a table on the dais. At the head of the table are ATTILA and ILDEGONDA, on ATTILA'S left hand side is KIRKA, further down ISLA, ONOGOST, and several of the HORSEMEN. The feast is already over, many are intoxicated from bops. In the middle of the chamber, a KOBZAR finishes a tale.*

THE KOBZAR: And the campaign ends. But there is no end to the tale.

VOICES: Glory! To the prince with the young bride—honor! Attila! Attila!

EDECON (*drunk, bugs and kisses his axe*): We, dear thing, took them for a walk! (*To the KOBZAR.*) Oh, you're lying about a thousand years. Our times will not come back.

THE KOBZAR: Are you full of wine?

EDECON: Throughout—up to now!

THE KOBZAR: And tomorrow you'll have slept it off—will you drink again then?

EDECON: I will!

THE KOBZAR: So too the earth: After a thousand years she will sleep it off—again she'll want to drink red.

ZIRCON (*to EDECON*): You mustn't worry: there will be knives, and plenty of rams.

EDECON: And I will not be me! (*He has surprised himself and falls silent. Laughter.*)

THE KOBZAR: Well, well, the axe is flying off the handle!

* Bard.

EDECON: A-ah, are you talking sideways at me? Are you for the Romans? I'll kill the Romans... (*Grabs the axe.*)

1ST HORSEMAN (*an old man*): Hush, you fool. Or don't you know: she is a young Roman herself, they say...

ATTILA'S CUPBEARER* (*brings a cup to the Kobzar*): The prince and the young princess offer you this cup of wine.

THE KOBZAR (*taking the cup—to the YOUNG [BRIDE]*): No sleep tonight, that the game may last until morning. (*Laughter.*)

1ST HORSEMAN (*to the 2ND*): A game is a game... but will it be fun?

2ND HORSEMAN: What's that?

1ST HORSEMAN: Look at the young woman—there's a cloud on her brow. Just wait, the storm will break.

THE CUPBEARER (*brings the cup to KIRKA*): The prince and the young princess offer you this cup of wine.

1ST HORSEMAN (*to the 2ND*): Look, look, this is his old... (*Everyone is quiet, watching.*)

KIRKA (*gets up. Her hand trembles, she splashes the wine. With difficulty, after a pause*): May my prince live long... and lo-... love... the young princess...

2ND HORSEMAN: Look at that... she spilled it on the cloth!

1ST HORSEMAN: And Greek wine is like blood. On white, look...

KIRKA (*having drunk the wine, sits down. She closes her eyes with her hand, opens them again. To ATTILA*): Do you remember our wedding, prince? It rained all night, knocking on our roof, and in the morning you opened the window...

ATTILA (*without taking his eyes off ILDEGONDA*): Was it raining? I don't remember... maybe it was... (*To ILDEGONDA*) Say at least one word...

CAMEL, *wearing wooden shoes, trying not to thump, comes up behind ILDEGONDA, stops. ILDEGONDA, hearing, looks around. So does ATTILA.*

ATTILA (*to ZIRCON, in a whisper, furiously*): Tell him to get out of here... or else...

ZIRCON (*quietly*): What? Is the pebble heavy? (*Approaches CAMEL.*)

EDECON (*pounding on the table*): Smash them, smash the Romans!

THE HORSEMEN (*calming him down*): Hush, hush!

* Actually *chasbnik*, a monk in charge of the cellars.

ISLA (*all the time vigilantly watching* ATTILA, *getting up*): No, louder! Louder! Otherwise we'll forget that we invited all these guests to a feast, and where is the meat? It's still growling in the forest! That we lit the stove so hot, and where is the wood? Still growing in the forest?

VOICES: What is he talking about?

ISLA: What about? About Rome! Or have you forgotten that Rome has been wounded—but is not dead yet. So that you don't sleep in late with the women, so that you don't drink yourselves into oblivion, that's what I'm talking about!

VOICES: He's right... Right...! Oh...!

EDECON: Ach, then you stay awake!

ISLA (*to* ATTILA): Don't be angry. (*ATTILA, frowning, is silent.*)

ONOGOST (*trying to change the subject*): Uhh... this is the most... What was it I wanted? Yes... there were chicken brains... where are they? Who has them?

ZIRCON: Who has chicken brains? Why, it's you! (*Laughter.*)

ONOGOST (*angrily*): You think I'm drunk, fool? (*To* ATTILA) I guess we are drunk, it's time to wind things down. Look: these people are lying on their faces, and these people are under the table.

ATTILA: Let's ask the young lady. (*To* ILDEGONDA) Would you like to go to the bedchamber? It seems to me that it's time for us to start the performance... or rather, to finish.

ILDEGONDA *is silent.*

ATTILA (*to* ONOGOST): Ha! She is silent!

ZIRCON (*to* ATTILA): Well, ask yourself: Would you want to die? Perhaps you would keep silent, too.

ONOGOST: You fool of a Moor. We are at a wedding, and what do you talk about?

ZIRCON: What about? The fool whistles—the clever one understands.

A STABLEMAN (*worried, runs in*): Onogost, come quickly!

ONOGOST: What? Pulled like a chain.

THE STABLEMAN: Trouble!

ONOGOST: What else?

THE STABLEMAN (*of* ATTILA): Do you know his black horse?

ONOGOST: Well?

THE STABLEMAN: He was standing there, eating oats, then suddenly, he was on the ground. We went to look at him: he was dead...

ONOGOST: Ah, what evil! Maybe poisoned?

THE STABLEMAN: How will the prince react? I'm afraid.

ONOGOST: We'll wait until morning: he who sleeps with a young bride, forgives everything.

KIRKA: What happened? What are you talking about over here?

ONOGOST: Yes, we were talking... about this, about that... I say it's time to sleep. It's late, the lights are burning out.

KIRKA: Let the lights burn all night. I'm afraid...

ONOGOST: Of what?

KIRKA: I do not know... A knock on the door will give me a fever, the clink of a bowl, and I shudder all over...

ONOGOST: Rest assured: we're keeping an eye out. Although, of course...

ATTILA (*to ILDEGONDA*): You're awfully quiet. What knits your eyebrows like wings? They will not fly you away anywhere. Now your serpentine tongue will not help you, nor Rome, nor your God, no one. So you're silent? Lost the game?

EDECON (*dancing on the spot, sings*): Ah, honey—ah, wine! A longing heart drinks, and everything's fine!

1ST HORSEMAN: Quiet down, you.

2ND HORSEMAN: First he drinks, now he digs up the earth with his horns!

At this time, ONOGOST approaches the KOBZAR and two SINGERS—one is younger, the other gray-bearded—then goes to ATTILA.

ONOGOST: Shall the Kobzar sing again?

ATTILA: He has already sung enough.

ONOGOST: Then there are these singers from overseas: that one, with the gray beard, is a Norse skald, and the younger one is a Gothic singer.

ATTILA: Well, let one of them go ahead, and that will do: it's time for us...

ILDEGONDA: But quickly! It doesn't matter which...

ATTILA: Thank you for giving me a word!

ONOGOST (*going up to the singers*): Hmm... you... or you... No, you'd be better... Oh, I can't choose! You... (*To the other.*) Or there is you...

GOthic SINGER: Well then, both!

ONOGOST: No, no: one... I'll tell you now... (*Screwing up his eyes, deciding with his fingers.*) You, old man. Come on. (*Leads the SKALD to ATTILA.*)

ATTILA (*to the SKALD*): So, can you sing such a song as will sprinkle my bride with the water of life, put fire in her eyes, make her smile?

THE SKALD: I don't know if she will smile or not... I'll try. Just a moment—here we go.

Tightens the strings on his lute. His hands are shaky.

ATTILA: What, have you been drinking? Are your hands shaking?

THE SKALD: I'm an old man, forgive me... just a moment, just a moment... (*He begins with a recitative.*) One day Vigurd came home: the gates were wide open, the dog was poisoned, his house was lifeless, silent. Æthelwulf had kidnapped his Hilda. For seven years Vigurd looked for her everywhere. He paid a visit to the Rhine. There a serpent crawled towards him from the black rocks—Vigurd heard an iron voice...

ATTILA: Well, yours is not like iron at all. It sounds like it's about to break. Sing more boldly, if you please. What are you afraid of?

THE SKALD: Vigurd grabbed a dagger. "Look around," the serpent told him. He looked around: a castle. He ran to it. Æthelwulf was there with her, with Hilda.

ILDEGONDA raises her head, looks at the SKALD.

THE SKALD: She looked at Vigurd: No, she did not recognize him, he had gone gray in seven years. Her husband told her: "Give him some wine, and let the old man sing a song." He sang—and she knew: it was him...

ILDEGONDA puts her hands on the table to support herself—it is clear that she was about to jump up.

THE SKALD: When he sang, she held back a cry—and suddenly the ringing of the lute ceased...

He lowers the lute, falls silent, his hands tremble, he looks at Ildegonda.

ATTILA: Well, go on! You've only whetted our appetites: giving us the smell of wine, but nothing yet to drink.

VOICES: Go on! Go on! Come now!

EDECON: Thrash the Romans! Let go, let me in—I will kill him!

1ST HORSEMAN: You crank! What Romans have we here?

ATTILA (*to the SKALD*): Well, finish it...

THE SKALD: I'm sorry... I can't... I can't... my legs will not hold me...

ATTILA: Well, sit down. (*Glancing at ILDEGONDA.*) Yes, you really have sprinkled her with the water of life: such a glow it seems the sun beats out of her eyes! (*To ILDEGONDA.*) Can't you tell me to believe that you didn't lie that night? Remember? In the tent... you said: "I will hug you until..."

ILDEGONDA (*looking at ATTILA, slowly*): Oh yes... wait a little... you will see: I will keep my promise...

ATTILA: Well, miracles! (*Of the SKALD.*) Give him some wine!

The CUPBEARER goes.

No, let the hostess bring it, let her bring it to him herself for pleasing her with the song.

ILDEGONDA (*bringing a cup*): The prince offers you this cup of wine. Drink!

ONE OF THE GUESTS: Wait, young lady, there is a custom that the hostess always sweetens the wine.

VOICES: Right! Right! Yes! Lips to lips!

ATTILA (*laughing*): He is right, Ildegonda: There is a custom. Or don't you want to kiss the old man? There is nothing to it: give him a kiss!

Laughter, shouting. The SKALD drinks, then kisses ILDEGONDA for a long time, without looking up.

VOICES: That's the way, old man! Very capable! The mushroom is old, but the root is fresh!

THE SKALD (*to ILDEGONDA*): Yes, your wine is sweet. How can I repay you? Do you want my lute? (*He holds out the lute with a trembling hand.*) Take it.

ILDEGONDA: What do I need it for?

THE SKALD (*his hand is trembling more and more. Beseechingly*): Take it. (*Quietly.*) Inside you will find... a knife...

ILDEGONDA seizes the lute. The SKALD'S legs give way from excitement and he sinks onto the bench.

ATTILA: You look a little weak, old man! (*To the CUPBEARER.*) Give him some more wine, before he kicks the bucket.

The CUPBEARER approaches and pours the SKALD more wine.

ILDEGONDA: And I... (*To the SKALD.*) For your lute... (*Drinks, brings the lute to an ear.*) Do you hear? It is singing... Or is it ringing in my blood? I want to sing and dance!

VOICES: Well, well! Now her... Who!

ZIRCON (*to* ATTILA): A word, friend: spruce is not pine, it makes noise for a reason.

ATTILA: Hold onto your mockeries until tomorrow!

ZIRCON: Many a truth is said in jest, but I'm not mocking now...

ATTILA (*to the* SKALD): Play on, old man. Let her dance, and love me!

VOICES: Lovely...! Lively...! Looking fine...!

The SKALD plays. ILDEGONDA is dancing. All are eagerly, silently watching, some jumping up from their seats to get closer.

KIRKA (*aside to* ONOGOST): What's going on with her? It isn't like her at all. When she is silent, I'm scared enough. But when she is merry, it's even more frightening...

At this time, CAMEL slowly advances until he's standing in front of ATTILA, looking at him. ATTILA sees. He has a bowl in his hands, it drops to the table—smashed to pieces. Everything stops instantly.

VOICES: What is it now? What? What?

Silence.

ATTILA (*to* CAMEL): You again? What do you want?

CAMEL: When?

ISLA: You gave your word, Attila, don't forget!

ATTILA is silent.

ILDEGONDA (*going up to* ATTILA): What is it? Don't you like the way I dance?

ATTILA: You dance so well... that I'm afraid—I will cease to be Attila.

ILDEGONDA: So who really lost the game? (*Laughs.*)

ATTILA: Wait, you laugh too soon.

ILDEGONDA: Why? Because Rome and I are one? (*Laughs.*)

EDECON (*waking up, raises his head*): S-mash Ro... (*They clamp his mouth.*)

ATTILA (*to* ILDEGONDA): You are not wise to mention Rome. You're going to regret it... be careful!

ILDEGONDA: You won't have to regret it!

ATTILA: I won't have time... Eh, let's cut right to it! Wine, to me. (*Pours it, he drinks.*) (*To* CAMEL.) You asked me: when? So I answer you: tomorrow...

ISLA: There's Attila! There!

ATTILA: Be silent. E-ehi, everyone listen now! Have you fallen asleep? You've slept enough! Or have you forgotten how you swore that Rome would be ground to dust?

VOICES: To dust! To dust!

ATTILA: So tomorrow at dawn—we campaign! The ones who have not had time to finish building, let them burn what they started to the ground. The arms that embrace you and keep you at home... let them chop off their hands. Tomorrow all are on horseback!

VOICES: Yes, yes! Strike fear into them! Rear up on hind legs!

ISLA: It's you—you again, Attila!

VOICES: Hurrah, Attila! You! You are ours! Ours!

ATTILA: So, until the morning!

VOICES: Morning! Morning!

EDECON (*raising his head, looks at ATTILA*): Fare... farewell. Farewell!
(*Cries bitterly.*)

Unclear speech. The guests disperse. EDECON, sloshed, remains on the bench. Beside him—ATTILA, KIRKA, ILDEGONDA, ISLA, ONOGOST, ZIRCON; the SKALD wants to leave.

ILDEGONDA (*to the SKALD, quietly*): Do you wish to leave me alone?

THE SKALD: I'm trembling all over—you see... I will bring us both to ruin.

ILDEGONDA: So take your lute—go!

THE SKALD (*hesitates. Then*): I will stay...

ATTILA (*coming up to ILDEGONDA*): Come on, the night is short. It's time.

ILDEGONDA: Time, you say? (*Looks silently at ATTILA.*) Very well, let's go. (*To ONOGOST.*) Take my lute ahead of me, put it on the bed. I will play a song for my husband, such a song that he will forget everything in the world!

ONOGOST takes the lute, goes. KIRKA grabs his arm.

ATTILA: If only I could forget one word: tomorrow.

KIRKA (*to ONOGOST*): No.

ATTILA (*to ONOGOST*): Have you lost your strength? Carry it.

KIRKA (*clinging to ONOGOST*): No! No!

ATTILA (*to KIRKA—severely*): I said carry it! Do you hear?

KIRKA (*releasing* ONOGOST, *to* ATTILA): Forgive me... I do not know what is wrong with me, but my heart sank so suddenly, that I... Go, Onogost...

ONOGOST *takes the lute away*. KIRKA *approaches* ILDEGONDA, *looks into her eyes, silently, for a long time*.

KIRKA: Ildegonda, I will forgive you everything. As a sister I will love you, like a slave I will serve you, swear to me only one thing: that you do not conceal evil towards him in your heart, that you will decorate his life with yours, swear!

ILDEGONDA: I'm sorry for you, Kirka... Forgive me.

KIRKA: You will not swear? So you do...

ATTILA (*to* KIRKA): Be gone!

KIRKA (*hastily*): No, no... she would not say... I'm afraid, let me remain—just to hear if you are breathing, or laughing, or if you've said a word...

ATTILA *moves away from her, she falls silent with outstretched hands*. *Girls surround* ILDEGONDA *and lead her to the bedchamber*.

ILDEGONDA (*to the* SKALD): Well, old man, so long... I don't know: will it be forever, or until the morning?

THE SKALD (*makes a movement towards* ILDEGONDA, *then takes control of himself*): Farewell!

ILDEGONDA: So you will be here—remember!

THE SKALD: Yes!

Like a sack, he sinks onto the bench. ILDEGONDA *goes into the bedchamber*.

ATTILA (*to* ONOGOST): Prepare a horse for me for the morning. Get him fed and shod.

ONOGOST: A horse?

ATTILA: Why are you looking at me like that? As white as a woman! Be ashamed of yourself!

ONOGOST: A horse? The black one?

ATTILA: Have you gone crazy, or deaf? The black horse, yes.

ONOGOST *departs*. ATTILA *is alone*. *He stands gloomily, hunched over*.

ZIRCON (*going up to him*): Why are your shoulders bent, friend? What burden do you carry?

ATTILA (*slowly*): Attila... he is heavy, you know...

ZIRCON: I know, friend, I know...

ATTILA (*silent. Then*): It does not matter! Whatever tomorrow will be, the night before dawn is mine!

KIRKA (*from a distance, holding out her hands, quietly*): Stop! Look at me, just once!

ATTILA *does not hear. He enters the bedchamber. The bolt clangs as it is slid.*

ONOGOST (*extinguishing some of the lamps. To himself*): “Prepare,” he says, “a horse...” And the horse is long since prepared: belly up, lying dead... Eh! (*To ISLA.*) Come on.

They exit. The room is in twilight, two or three lamps. In a dark corner, curled up, lies ZIRCON. EDECON, on the bench, sleeps like a dead man, hugging his axe. The SKALD and KIRKA tiptoe to the bedroom door from different directions.

KIRKA: Why are you here, old man?

THE SKALD: I’m... I’m expecting something...

KIRKA: What?

THE SKALD: Not what you’d expect.

KIRKA: Are you sick? You’re shaking.

THE SKALD: I caught a chill along the way...

ATTILA’S *laughter is heard in the bedchamber.*

KIRKA: Do you hear that? He’s laughing. I remember it, I know this laugh: so he used to laugh with me. Outside the window, it was raining. I said, “Put out the light.” He lay down next to me, in the dark, only his white teeth showing...

THE SKALD: And you saw how they sit, those teeth, bared forever—they laugh louder and louder, but nobody hears, nobody. Nobody—you understand?

KIRKA: What are you talking about? I’m afraid of you.

The strings of the lute are heard.

THE SKALD (*gasping*): There seems to be a lute... (*Grabs KIRKA by the arm.*) Tell me: am I wrong? Or do you hear it too?

KIRKA: Yes, I can hear him laughing again. I see through a crack in the wall: now he has taken off her clothes... she’s covering her breasts...

THE SKALD: No more! (*Recovers.*) Though an old man, I... But when I hear a kiss... Wait... Calm down...

Both listen.

The lute fell to the floor... Now... Listen!

KIRKA: You will fall yourself, sit down!

The SKALD sinks onto the bench. Pause.

THE SKALD: Hurry... No strength to wait... I'll run away... Scream...
Drop everything...

KIRKA (*leaning against the door*): I know: now she will scream, she will shout: it hurts...

THE SKALD: No, he will shout—you hear? He!

In the bedchamber, ATTILA'S voice, the clang of the bolt being pulled back.

KIRKA: Shhh... he's coming!

KIRKA runs back to the far corner. The SKALD rushes to the door. ATTILA comes out of the bedchamber, his shirt unbuttoned, a lute in his hands. Caught by his gaze, the SKALD freezes.

ATTILA (*searching for someone with his eyes, sees ZIRCON, beckons him*): I need you... (*Clutching ZIRCON'S shoulders—quietly.*) Listen: You must never speak, to anybody, of what I'm about to tell you...

ZIRCON: Speak—I will be silent, like the earth.

ATTILA: I can't, do you understand?

ZIRCON: You can't what?

ATTILA: I can't give her up to die! I can't watch her lips turn blue, I can't close her eyes... I can't!

ZIRCON: Don't want it reported you overexerted yourself? Eh, friend!

From the floor, he hugs him, presses himself to ATTILA'S legs.

ATTILA: Quiet! Nobody is to...

ZIRCON: And tomorrow? What will happen tomorrow?

ATTILA: I don't want tomorrow...

ZIRCON: Whether you want it or not, it will be there. You can't get away from him. Unless... into the ground: There he will not catch up. (*He is silent, burying himself in ATTILA'S feet.*)

ATTILA: Well, so it will be... Go, sleep.

ZIRCON, covering his face with his hands, exits the room.

ATTILA (*to the SKALD*): Come here, old man. (*Goes to the table, pours wine, peers at the SKALD.*) Somehow I know your eyes... You've never sung for me before?

THE SKALD (*with difficulty*): N-no. Sing, no, I have never sung...

ATTILA (*opens his shirt*): It's as if I'm hot on an evil afternoon. Or was it she who fired up my blood? (*He drinks the cup in one gulp.*) All in vain

she boasted: she can't play a note. She asked you to sing a song to cheer her up.

THE SKALD: She asked me... And my lute?

ATTILA: She asked, yes. What are you looking at? Take it and play it, so that I can't hear myself, so I can forget today and tomorrow, and everything in the world! Do you understand? Play.

Leaves, again the clang of the bolt.

THE SKALD (*throwing the lute on the ground in desperation*): Oh, damn you! Everything is lost... Now it is the end...

KIRKA (*runs up to him happily*): He's alive! Like a weight off my shoulders! Oh, let him lie with her, let him hug her, let them kiss, it's easy for me—he's alive... kissing... do you hear?

THE SKALD: Dog! Hun!

Raising the lute high, he makes a dart for the door. Suddenly stops, shakes the lute near his ear once more.

THE SKALD (*enthusiastically*): It is gone, there is no knife. You hear: it does not ring. So, then, she took the knife—she has the knife!

KIRKA: Knife? Who are you? Help...

The SKALD covers her mouth. KIRKA grabs him by the beard, by the hair, which pull off—the beard and wig are in KIRKA'S hands. For a moment, both stare at each other in confusion.

KIRKA: Vigil... Help!

VIGIL rushes out the door. KIRKA starts to run after him and stops. From the bedchamber one can hear ATTILA groan, the heavy fall of a body.

KIRKA (*rushing to the door of the bedchamber*): Help! Here! Hurry! (*Beats on the door of the bedchamber.*) Oh, hurry! Here!

EDECON, awakening with difficulty, comes running in, ISLA, ONOGOST, ZIRCON, CAMEL, and others behind him. They surround KIRKA.

VOICES: Who? Who! Trouble! Lights! (*To KIRKA.*) Where is he?

KIRKA (*panting*): He ran away... (*She points to the door.*) She is there... (*She points to the bedchamber and, almost fainting, is held up under the arms.*)

ONOGOST: Follow him!

Several people rush outside with ONOGOST in pursuit of the escaping man. The rest remain at the door of the bedchamber.

VOICES: With the shoulder... like this! More! Hit! Together!

EDECON (*with axe raised*): Stand back... all of you! Out of the way!

Quickly breaks down the door with the axe. It opens: ATTILA prone in the doorway and ILDEGONDA with a knife by the bed. Everyone freezes.

KIRKA (*rushing to ATTILA'S body, hugs him*): You! You! Your blood!

Silence.

ILDEGONDA (*appears in the doorway, looks wildly at everyone*): And where is he? Where is he?

ISLA: Arrgh, her! (*ILDEGONDA is captured, held.*) Who is he? Answer me!

ILDEGONDA is silent.

ONOGOST (*running in with the others*): Caught him!

CURTAIN

APPENDIX: Table of Names

For the curious.

<i>Names in Russian/Zamyatin's names</i> (Cyrillic)	<i>(Latin transliteration)</i>	<i>Name in this translation</i>	<i>Historical Person</i>
Атила	Atila	Attila	Attila
Керка	Kerka	Kirka	Kreka/Hereka
Ильдегонда	Ildegonda	Ildegonda	Ildico
Вигила	Vigila	Vigil	Vigil/Vigilius
Максимин	Maksimín	Maximinus	Maximinus
Приск	Prisk	Priscus	Priscus
Оногост	Onogost	Onogost	Onegesius
Едекон	Edekon	Edecon	Edeko/Edicon
Исла	Isla	Isla	Esla
Зыркон	Zyrkon	Zircon	Zerco/Zercon
Аэций	Aetsiy	Aëtius	Aetius/Aëtius
Анниан	Annian	Annian	Aignan/Agnan
Гоур	Gour	Gour	—
Камель	Kamel	Camel	—
Марулл	Marull	Marullus	(Marullus)*
Дулеб	Duleb	Duleb**	—
Ятвяг	Yatvyag	Yatvyag**	—
Вледа	Vleda	Vleda	Bleda†
Феодосий	Feodosiy	Theodosius	Theodosius
Евдокс	Evdoks	Eudoxus	(Eudoxus)*
Гензерик	Genzerik	Genseric	Gaiseric/Genseric

Additionally, “the eunuch” alluded to by Edecon in Act I is Chrysapheus. Aureli-anum is the Roman name of Orléans. And Vigurd is Sigurd/Siegfried who, in the legend, slew a serpent (dragon), but did not, as here, get any advice from one.

If you’re wondering what my system was in regard to names: There wasn’t any. Mostly I picked spellings that appealed to my eye, retaining the flair of Zamyatin’s Russian names for the Huns and favoring Latinization for the Romans. If you don’t like my choices, feel free to mix and match your own.

* Not historical characters as far as I can tell, but historical people do have these names.

** The Dulebs were a tribe; so were the Yatvyags (Yotvingians). Given the number of years spent on research, Zamyatin presumably knew this, and named individual characters after these tribes. However, that is only my supposition.

† Vleda also appears as Bleda in Zamyatin’s other work about Attila the Hun, the novel *The Scourge of God*.

other works by
Yevgeny Zamyatin
translated by the same translator

Big Kids' Fairytales
The Scourge of God

For other translations and original writings,
visit the translator at his website
www.kaiswansondale.com

"Heroic."

— Maxim Gorky

The riveting play about Attila!

Despite praise from its advance readers and a scheduled run at the Bolshoi Drama Theater in Leningrad, Yevgeny Zamyatin's historical tragedy (begun 1925 and completed 1928) never saw the stage lights. It was banned by the censors while still in rehearsal and not published until 1950, thirteen years after Zamyatin's death as an exile in Paris.

Now, for the first time in English, you can read Zamyatin's gripping masterpiece about Attila the Hun: a tale of power and desire and a Roman Empire on the brink of collapse.

*"The play is reminiscent of Shakespeare...
tragic, action-packed, and captivating."*