

Once upon a time...

II

Birds of a Feather

(Venezia present-day)

First: Some history

Between 350 and 550 A.D., Aquileia, the elegant Roman provincial capital of Veneto, was repeatedly sacked by barbarians from the north. The survivors moved to islands deep in the Venetian Lagoon centered at Torcello. Torcello swelled to a population of twenty thousand and was the main city of the area until Venice was created less than ten kilometers south. The rest, as they say, is history.

A powerful link to this bygone era is the time-softened throne of Attila the Hun squatting in a courtyard filled with statues and sculpture remnants as time-worn as the throne itself.

Torcello, with a present population of less than twenty, is wrapped in a compelling solitude that is in sharp contrast to nearby Venice. Through the years, this solitude has been broken by "new barbarians," spiritual sons of Attila, who come in small groups to pay homage to his throne. These men are mostly in their forties and fifties, successful in their fields, and with families. But, when they come to Torcello, they raise a little innocent, old-fashioned Cain, and wear helmets with horns, just like those worn by the Huns, their spiritual ancestors.

Present-Day Venice

Giulietta Pond, thirty-three, lost her dance career when she severely twisted her ankle while shopping along the San Barnabas canal in Dorsoduro. Slated to perform at La Fenice – her big break – she instead had to spend three years rehabilitating her ankle. Though she now walks, she does so with a limp and pain if she has to stand for any length of time. She met Fernando Beckman during rehabilitation and she and the tall, remote Anglo-Italian industrialist quickly became lovers.

Fernando and a group of his “lodge associates” come to Venice once a year to “honor” Attila the Hun by visiting his throne at Torcello. Giulietta affectionately calls them “Huns,” because they all claim descent, either actual or spiritual, from Attila and his times. For the last two years, Giulietta, in her new career as tour organizer, has been arranging this annual gathering for Fernando. Mr. Beckman has chosen to attend this latest reunion by arriving on his private yacht, the *MV Riga*. Giulietta is directing the gathering from the Riga, docked at Burano. Maria, her able assistant, is arranging the details from Giulietta’s elegant office apartment complex in Cannaregio.

Fernando has invited and paid for eighty-seven guests, by far the largest group that Giulietta has had to deal with on such a personal level. To make matters worse, she is finding herself further distracted by Fernando’s having asked for her hand in marriage. The worldly Giulietta, although intrigued, wrestles with his offer. “Why at this time?” Doubt permeates her personal and professional life. She must focus doubly hard to pull off the event: “Me? Raised on the streets of Trestavere to be the wife of Fernando? Birds of a feather?” She recalls that Fernando’s mother, Mia, was a Ligurian chambermaid and his father, “King Fred,” was the king of all the dart rooms in all the English pubs in San Remo. “Birds of a feather.” She laughs as she remembers Fernando explaining that his father was an Anglicized Pole who bragged that his lineage could be traced to King Attila himself. She recalls the anger in Fernando’s eyes when he mentioned his father’s “political” disappearance when he was ten.

Recently, Giulietta had gained the derisive title of “Queen of Mass Tourism,” because she was accused of opening up the Serenissima to large-scale package tour groups. The real reason for this ridicule was her success as a woman in a male-dominated industry. (The controversy was inflamed by rumors that pointed the finger at her for pushing mass tourism beyond San Marco and San Polo to the other Sestieri.)

The small groups of “Huns” she brings to Venice three or four times a year are a different matter. They are welcomed by Venetians, who love their playfulness, their convoluted sense of history and, of course, as has been the case throughout the centuries, their money.

For this gathering, she has arranged everything first-class: “It must have cost Fernando a fortune.” She has contracted the services of the “Marco Polo,” a large, fast “motoscafo” to transport the group from the airport to their hotels and to Torcello. They stay at the most expensive hotels, centered near Piazza San Marco. The most sought-after rooms are at the Bauer Grunwald, followed by The Danielle, and their multistar kin. This time, however, six of the group have complicated her planning by specifically choosing a little-known three-star hotel called the Bisanzio, located further along the Riva Dei Schiavoni.

Giulietta is perplexed by this request until Fernando blandly explains to her that the hotel is dear to them because it is named after Byzantium, the city that became Constantinople, and which was recaptured by Crusaders outfitted by Venetians early in the Middle Ages – Crusaders who, for the most part, came from the north. In this way, the six were honoring this historical event.

Giulietta notices that the six are very close to Fernando, even though they are professional men easily ten years younger than he and decidedly middle-class. Included are Lars Schmidt, a doctor; brothers Peter and Joachim Burt, both lawyers; John Thompson, a chef; and two administrators, one in government (Gregory Aimes), and Nico Brahms, an official at Citroën Austria. Again, Giulietta perceives their close association with the Mayfair-based Fernando, a sleek billionaire industrialist, as odd.

The main event for this gathering is a picnic she has arranged in the “piazza” at Torcello, where Attila’s throne sits. She has hired the staff of the “Restaurant of Attila,” a popular trattoria on Torcello, to cater the picnic. The event is being held under a huge, ornate, Bedouin-style tent provided by Fernando. The expensive foods and wines being served were brought to Torcello from the cargo holds of the Riga, docked at the island of Burano, five hundred meters away.

As our story unfolds, Giulietta becomes aware that this gathering is somehow different, but she is too busy overseeing the event to think it through. It doesn’t help that Fernando spends a lot of time at the Bisanzio. Aboard the Riga, she notices that a Burano fishing boat, the *Nina*, has taken the place of the *Rigalita I*, one of the two sleek launches that act as tenders to the Riga. The sturdy craft, which has been revamped and fitted with a radio and tall antenna, looks oddly out of place on its cradle next to the *Rigalita II*.

During an inventory check, she notices a small forklift strapped down in the hold. Her inquiring mind compels her to read the papers attached to it which state that it was picked up in Trieste a week earlier. That evening, she asks Fernando about the Nina, and Fernando laughingly tells her that he wants to use it in the future when he returns to Torcello. "Why don't you use it this time?" she asks. He scoffs: "My dear Giulietta, my Roman love. What is this, another inquisition? I saw the Nina and fell in love with her last year. That's all." She blurts out in a laugh: "And the forklift from Trieste, plopped so voluptuously among the cases of champagne and prosecco and Parma hams and the expensive gull eggs, you fell in love with that too, eh? (She punches him playfully.) In Trieste, just before arriving? Darling Fernando, I know you're a lover, but I'm jealous now of the Nina and what's her name?" Fernando is confused: "Who?" She laughs: "What is the name of the forklift?" She gives him a big kiss. They go to bed.

On Torcello, the morning of the feast, Giulietta is once again puzzled as she observes Fernando joining the Bisanzio group, which had arrived in a water taxi before the others. They exchange pleasantries with Giulietta; then Fernando leads them on a tour of the tiny town. Later, as she waits for the Marco Polo to arrive, she notices them walking through what appears to be a set pattern – like a rehearsal, she thinks. She tries to listen in, but they are speaking some Eastern European language that she doesn't understand. The Marco Polo arrives and the other eighty "Huns" disembark, each carrying a large day bag.

Fernando takes his place sitting at the head of the picnic tables, next to Attila's throne. When all are seated, he rises and states: "Gentlemen, shall we begin."

In unison, all eighty-six pull from their bags heavy metal-horned helmets, the same as their spiritual ancestors wore fifteen hundred years ago. As they solemnly put on their helmets, the mood of the gathering shifts. It's as if mental chains were broken. The group becomes more animated and expansive in their gestures and speech. The feast is an instant success, with the men taking turns having their pictures taken seated on the throne.

Fernando is offered a toast by Lars: "Dear Fernando, a toast for keeping the spirit of Attila alive. And for making it possible that we could all attend and honor our forebears in such rustic elegance. (He grasps his goblet and moves his outstretched arm in an arc around the tent. He stops at the church.) To you, sublime church, the link to the ancients. To your revealing frescoes, to your repository of history and timelessness. For that is where we live, gentlemen, in timelessness. (He turns to the throne.)

To you, dear Attila. To your eternity. To all of us. Salute! And to you again, Fernando, we salute you!"

The group salutes by chanting: "To you, Fernando; to you, Attila; to you, Fernando; to you, Attila!" Fernando walks slowly to the throne and sits down. Giulietta notices the deep, satisfied gleam rise up in Fernando's eyes. She smiles openly at his "triumph." A huge cheer rises from the group.

Lars is exuberant as he continues: "And, to this glorious day. Will the future turn to the past glory? We shall see. That I guarantee you, friends. (He pulls a sheet of paper out of his pocket and reads.) We are from all over the world. The spiritual heirs of Attila. From Austria [a contingent of Austrians claps]; from England [more isolated clapping]; from the U.S.A. [more claps]; from Russia, Latvia, Poland, Japan [two Japanese nationals stand up and are cheered]; and from Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Lombardy, and even Roma herself." Several men rise and hold their helmets aloft. The group stands in unison and starts chanting, "Hail, Attila! Hail, Attila!"

Lars, even more exuberant, continues where he left off: "We are a nucleus for a world movement, and I guarantee you, friends, after tomorrow..." (The microphone is grabbed by Fernando, who deftly derails Lars' atavistic euphoria.) "Tomorrow. Tomorrow belongs to you, my lads. Tomorrow we will return to our homelands recharged, refreshed, bathed in this moment. Enjoy yourself and have good cheer." He hands the mike to the more sober Peter, who leads the group in a series of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," directed at Fernando.

The party continues deep into the evening. Giulietta notices that more champagne is needed, nods to her assistant, Maria, and the job is done.

At the end of the festivities, the well-lubricated group boards the Marco Polo. Giulietta does a head count and finds six are missing. She finds Fernando and tells him. Fernando edgily assures her that they had left earlier by water taxi since they had early flights to their homes. As the Marco Polo leaves, Giulietta scans the group and realizes the six are Lars and the others who are staying at the Bisanzio. Though about to go aboard as planned, she decides to stay. She waves to Maria: "You take it from here. I have things to work out." The boat leaves, swallowed by the embracing fog.

As the fog thickens, the tender Rigalita II enters the channel leading to the center of Torcello. Several boat lengths behind her chugs the Nina with the forklift and the Bisanzio group aboard. Before entering the channel, the Nina backs off, as planned, and stays hidden in the thickening fog behind the log pilings. On board, Lars looks at his watch. They wait.

The Rivalita II docks. Fernando is talking with the caterers and has just given them a huge tip. All are grateful. Fernando sees the enveloping fog and says, "Best get back to the boat quickly." He is about to get in when Giulietta appears out of the fog. Fernando masks his anger by putting on a stern demeanor. He stumbles over his thoughts. "My guests... some of them have drunk too much. They need you."

"Maria can handle them," she answers.

"Well, we'd best get back," Fernando curtly states. They climb aboard the tender and head for the Riga. Fernando notices that Giulietta is worried and deftly reassures her: "It is no problem. Remember, the Riga is just five hundred meters away."

Giulietta looks back at where Torcello has disappeared in the fog as the skillful deckhands follow the beeping of the radio from the Riga. They pass close by several of the upright log booms lashed tightly together by iron straps. The log booms act as channel guides, but impish Giulietta bursts out with a bitter laugh as they pass a particularly suggestive coupling, "Looks more like a bunch of phalli to me." Fernando smirks and throws his shoulders back: "Like a bond, like a brotherhood."

She quips: "Like a bunch of Huns hung up on each other." He ignores her bitterness as the massive bulk of the Riga takes shape in the fog.

Back at the channel, the six from Bisanzio silently pole their way up the channel in the Nina. The fog is now thick and their arrival is not noticed. They move past where the Marco Polo had docked to another small private landing close by.

Back at the MV Riga, Giulietta is restless. Her Roman mind is working overtime trying to weave the loose strands of coincidence into a reality. Her efforts crystallize when she walks aft and discovers that the Nina is not on board. She goes below decks and sees that the forklift is also gone. Then it dawns on her: Fernando and the six who are staying at the Bisanzio are attempting to steal the throne of Attila.

She rushes back to the cabin she has been sharing with Fernando. He's not there. After a brief, frantic search, she finds him in the radio room and confronts him. He laughs, denies everything, and adds that it's not such a bad idea: "At least it would be in a proper setting – back where Attila came from. Protected from the elements. Yes, Giulietta. Maybe not such a bad idea at all. One thing, though, that perplexes me about your idea. Why does one steal when one can just take?"

She looks at him, speechless. She understands what he is saying – and asking – of her: Is she with him or not? It is up to her. Her silence forces Fernando to demand that she return to their cabin. He explains that something important has come up that he must attend to. She leaves,

but quickly returns, demanding to be told the truth. Even though she has guessed it, she wants to hear it from him. Fernando insists that she return to her cabin and think, "...to be logical, like a good Roman." She refuses to leave. The chief mate escorts her back to her cabin and locks her in.

On Torcello, the townspeople have retired for the night. The ornate tent billows ominously in the slight wind. Under it sits the throne of Attila.

Through the fence bordering the piazza, we see Lars peering in and giving a hand signal behind himself to Peter, who in turn repeats it to his brother, Joachim. The process is repeated until all have the signal to move forward. At the Nina, Gregory activates the silent electric-powered forklift and drives it up the ramp and down the path, which is lined with ancient, time-worn statues that glint palely in the shrouding fog.

Shortly, the forklift emerges from the gate that Lars has opened. The six circle the throne, wearing their helmets and shouldering long wrecking bars.

After a moment of silence, they go to work, wedging their bars under the throne and prying it up from the rear, creating just enough space for the forklift to work its tines under its mass. They grunt and groan as they slowly work the throne onto the forklift. Once it's on, they attempt to lift it, but find that the throne is heavier than the forklift. They are in a quandary until Lars figures it out. All six of the "Huns" then clamber aboard the forklift and the weight of the throne is counterbalanced. Slowly, through the fog, the throne, with a halo of helmeted Huns, makes its way down the long, statue-bordered path to the canal and the waiting Nina.

Aboard the Riga Giulietta is furious at her treatment and tries to get out of her cabin. Failing in that attempt, she pulls out her cell phone and calls 112. After several rings, the sleepy voice of Antonio, on duty at the Burano police station, answers: "Pronto?"

Giulietta tries to explain that the Huns are stealing Attila's throne. She only manages to confuse Antonio, who assumes she is drunk. She has an idea and tells Antonio they have already killed six people who were staying at the Hotel Bisanzio. "It's late. Check the hotel and see if they are there."

Upon hearing of killings, Antonio decides to call the Questura at Venice. A sleepy Raphaelo answers and becomes just as confused when Antonio gives his convoluted report. Raphaelo calls the Bisanzio and finds that indeed the men are not in their rooms. He notices on his duty roster the name of Fernando Beckman and realizes he is a very important person whose well-being is assigned to Commandante Vero himself, so he decides to bite the bullet and calls Vero at his Lido home.

The sleeping Vero irritably answers. When Raphaelo explains the situation, Vero scratches his bristled face and mutters to himself: "What is this?" Rosa, his wife, is awake and asks: "What's wrong?" Vero answers questioningly: "Someone at Burano called in and said six people were killed trying to steal the throne of Attila." Rosa snorts: "Get back to bed. Somebody is having fun with you." Vero mumbles to himself: "Can this possibly be?" He tells Raphaelo that he will deal with this personally. He hangs up and checks his phone book and finds Fernando's phone number on the Riga and prepares to dial. Rosa stops him: "Be sensible. No one would want to steal the throne of Attila, much less die for it. It's not a Tintoretto." Frustrated, Vero explains: "But... but Mr. Beckman is a close friend of mine. He... he's a lover of Venice and has helped in many restorations. Who would spread a rumor like that?" Rosa snorts sarcastically: "Well, if you're really such a good friend of his, then call him. It's only three in the morning." Vero, half-dressed, silently agrees: "If he is in any danger on my watch..." He gets on the cell phone to Antonio at Burano and tells him: "I'll handle this myself. I'll be at the Riga in ten minutes by helicopter. Stay out of it." He rushes out into the night, sees the fog, and swears. He jumps into the cockpit of his chopper, the Andiamo, and starts the turbines.

At Burano, Antonio sits at his desk, frustrated, then has an idea. He will check it out for himself. He races down to the canal, jumps into his small outboard, fires it up and heads for Torcello.

Aboard the Riga, Fernando and "Sparks," his radioman, are deep in concentration, listening to the signal from the Nina confirming that the throne is on its way to the Riga.

The Nina is dangerously overloaded as they move cautiously through the dense fog and down the silted channel, making sure that they stay in the center. The Nina plows through the water, with only an inch or two of freeboard.

At the other end of the canal, after a lifetime of fishing the waters with his father, Antonio enters by instinct. He hears the throb of the Nina's engine but can't see her because of the fog. As the sound gets closer, he turns on the powerful spotlight he would normally use for fishing. The Nina emerges out of the fog like an apparition from hell. The six "Huns" are still wearing their helmets. They instinctively raise their forearms to shield their eyes from the spotlight's glare.

In an instant, the heavy Nina plows into the outboard, forcing it against the wall and hurling Antonio into the water. It is so silted he doesn't go under, but sinks deeply in the muck. He flops around as the silt's suction

on his legs causes him to lose his balance. He pulls out his service revolver and blindly fires several shots into the gloom in the direction of the Nina.

On board the Nina, one of Antonio's bullets hits Joachim in the back. He slumps over the throne, his blood spilling over the white marble. Lars attends to him while John monitors the radio signals. The Riga is barely two hundred meters in front of them.

Fernando hears the loud buzz of the helicopter so, as planned in case of an emergency, they stop the beeps – the signal for the Nina to shut down and wait. Vero lands the helicopter, shuts off the rotor, steps down, stiffens his posture, and heads smartly up the gangway.

On board, Fernando sees the helicopter and quickly directs the chief mate to free Giulietta from the cabin. Fernando and Giulietta meet the Commandante, who nods curtly to Giulietta but directs his interest to Fernando. Fernando wears a disarming smile: "Perhaps the good Commandante will come into the warmth and comfort of my cabin and explain why he has honored us with his visit. Giulietta, please join us."

Inside the cabin, Fernando introduces Giulietta: "Commandante, this is Giulietta Pond..." Vero realizes that this is the person who made the accusations to Antonio: "I understand you're the queen of the mass tourism that's overwhelming Venice. Pond is your last name, right? You're not Italian, are you? Where are the six men who are staying at the Bisanzio?"

She ignores Vero's arrogance and mentally prepares to deal with him on her own terms, and repair the consequences of her impulsiveness in calling 112.

Vero continues: "I received a call that six men have been killed." Fernando intervenes, laughing: "The men you speak of are out drinking. They left by boat. They are as close to me as you are, Commandante Vero. (He looks sardonically at Giulietta) Giulietta has worked very hard organizing our event. She is very tired, Commandante. Besides which, I have complicated her life. Commandante, you are the first to know, I have asked Giulietta to be my wife." Giulietta is silent.

Vero stammers: "I... I didn't know. This is indeed an honor. I'm sorry I said... I... I didn't know."

Fernando confides: "Don't worry about what you said about her, but be forewarned: she is pure Trastevere. She can be a tiger. My proposal is to be kept a secret. So please, Commandante, keep it to yourself until the official announcement. And if the good Commandante would be so kind as to give my bride-to-be a lift home to Cannaregio, I will pay the cost of the inconvenience. And Commandante, the idea of someone stealing Attila's

throne. Come on! Perhaps someone should take the throne and clean and store it. Now that is not such a bad idea, no?"

Again Vero stammers: "Ah... yes... yes... you are right, the throne should be treated more honorably." Fernando looks deeply into the Commandante's eyes: "You will give this a first priority, will you not? I will pay all expenses." The Commandante salutes Fernando. Giulietta doesn't say a thing. Fernando gives her hand to the heel-clicking Commandante. Vero says: "This is indeed a great honor." He leads her to his helicopter.

As the Andiamo is fired up, Fernando hurries back up to the radio room to join Sparks and resume the beeps directing the Nina back to the Riga.

Meanwhile, with the motor turned off, the Nina had drifted out of the channel, passing a set of pilings dimly illuminated by the frail beam of their lone flashlight. When John starts the engine and attempts to get back into the channel, he misjudges the distance to the pilings and brushes against them. The Nina wobbles, water splashes inside, but the craft moves forward. They are not so lucky with the next set of pilings, hitting it squarely and wedging the prow deep into the three cabled-together pilings. The crash jars Joachim, who is still alive and being attended to by Lars.

On board the Riga, Fernando and Sparks listen to John explain what happened and tell them that the pilings are marked "Number Three." A map of the area is laid out and Fernando pinpoints their location barely one hundred meters away. The Rigalita II is lowered to the water to help rescue the Nina.

Hovering above in the Andiamo, Vero turns toward Venice. Giulietta, sitting next to him, is aware that the Commandante reeks with self-importance. She takes charge by opening her legs just two inches, turns, and stares directly into his eyes. "Commandante, fly low over Torcello and turn your spotlight on the piazza so I can say goodbye to Attila's throne."

The Commandante is bewildered by her body language and her request. He jerkily shifts his craft over to Torcello and turns on his powerful searchlight. The beam fights its way downward through the fog. She deliberately does not tell him of the tent and the turbulence of the chopper's blades makes the huge Bedouin tent whip wildly about, like some gigantic angry bird. It is only through Vero's skill that they don't crash. They move away.

The Commandante is shaken to his very core and wide-eyed with horror at the close call. Giulietta, on the other hand, is in total control. She calmly opens her purse, takes out her mirror, gazes into it, and flicks at her hair. She turns to Vero and smiles: "Like birds of a feather, Commandante.

Take me back to the Riga. Andiamo.” The bewildered Commandante obeys.

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