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The Great Leader

WE WILL COME LIKE bad weather, a storm of dust and hoofbeats and steel, of carbines firing skyward, of war cries and horse breath and clanging boots in stirrups and rattling equine teeth chomping bits. We will envelop the desert and then the farms and then the towns and at last your cities, a wave, a pestilence, a plague, a swarm, a flood, a stampede, an infestation, an engulfing, an overwhelming, a great rolling up and twisting of the earth so that pouring down upon you is fire and stone and bone and entrails. We are thousands, tens of thousands, beyond the horizon, a horde to overwhelm your paltry fortifications, your flimsy defense, your delicate skirt of propriety, your garter of modesty, your undergarments of shame. We are massing, growing with every second stronger while you weaken; we are gathering, becoming ever more confident while your doubts redouble; we are expanding, our chests heaving full from deep, engorging breaths, our arms and shoulders thickening with hard, unbending muscle while you diminish and atrophy, your breathing labored, your lungs rattling, your arms splindling.

We have ten squadrons on horse for every squad you have on foot, a dozen warriors in the saddle for every one of your boys cowering in a hole, and our women! Our women produce ten strong sons for every one spawned by your decadent, pallid, malnourished city whores. Our aim with rifle and bow is true to five hundred meters, our curved swords deadly swung from our mounts, our mailed fists ready to reach down from on horseback to wring you by your bean-pole neck. We will come at dawn, we will come at dusk, we will come by day and by night, over mountains, desert, prairie, and ice, up rivers, boring tunnels through the earth, an advance of thousands that will trample every square meter of your pathetic little state.

We will slaughter your cats, eat your dogs, and burn your crop. We will use your houses for kindling, your thatch for fodder, your furniture for bayonet practice.

We will shit in your mouths. We will piss on your faces. We will rape your wives and shoot our seed into your daughters. We will wipe our cocks on your holiest books.

We will march you from your city and we will kill every man, we will impregnate every woman, and we will enslave all of your children. We will rip up every one of your cobblestoned streets. We will tear down your churches. We will quarter your machines, your engines and generators, our stallions pulling them apart and our smiths forging them into blades that we will use to castrate your sons. We will imprison your leaders and slice off their pricks and parade them through our encampment with their own genitals shoved into their mouths. Our hunting dogs will grow fat from drinking human blood. Our warriors will grow weary from cutting necks. Our children will grow tired from whipping your children.

Our Great Leader will lead us into battle.

We all recalled him from previous campaigns: thick-legged, sturdy-hipped, barrel-chested, brawny-armed with a pronounced chin, sharp cheekbones, and long, flowing, thick black hair, he was the embodiment of the best traits of our horde: strong, brave, fearless, a gifted rider, a sure shot, a quick blade. He was not only our Great Leader, he was our best warrior.

He was said to have been studying the arts of war in preparation for this campaign, to have become as wise as he is valiant. With the Great Leader in the van, we will be invincible.

Soon, very soon, we will come.

We encamped in the great mountains intersecting the lesser range that ran northward into the State. We were thousands now, restive, our horses running out of forage and our warriors growing thirsty for blood. We knew you were weak. Your defenses barely manned, your troops raw and undisciplined. We had sent squadrons through the desert, had made sport of pillaging your southernmost villages. We were sure you were soft on the outside and hollow in the middle. Unleash the horde, we begged our commanders, who instead of blowing the great battle horns and ordering the war drumming, were poring over maps and charts in their campaign tents.

What were they worrying over? We would sweep before us any resistance. Every one of you we had captured had proven to be weak and decadent. You were children; we were warriors. Our Great Leader, surely he understood this. But he had yet to arrive. Perhaps he was waiting for even more squadrons to gather from even more distant tribes. The sacking of the capital was not an event to be missed, we all knew, and we all planned to become rich from our spoils.

Our camp lay on a broad plain between peaks, beyond the sight of the most southerly of the State's fortifications. At night perhaps you could see our fires, as we could see yours, but by day we were invisible. We were growing impatient, had spent a month playing polo with sheep's heads and fighting with wooden practice swords. We were ready, had been ready for seasons, yet still the commanders dawdled, the Great Leader did not appear.

We were a great horde, yet as we waited a fortnight, there was among us a slow-spreading concern. Were we losing our focus? Our ruthlessness? It was hard staying battle ready day after day, waking to await the call to arms, the clarion for attack, only to realize by midafternoon that there would be no war that day. And then doubts set in: Did the Great Leader not trust us? Was the enemy stronger than we thought? And what about rumors of secret weapons, of flying machines and armored automobiles, of cannons that could shoot flame? We had dismissed them, yet as we tarried, we began increasingly to speculate: Could a horseman at full gallop with a lance run through the armor of a metal-clad automobile? Would a muslin facewrap protect from poison gas? Could an airship drop stones that would topple a horse?

The Great Leader would know these things.

The tribes had been gathered for a month. We were tired of eating only horse-meat and mare's milk porridge. We needed everything: women, liquor, water—oh, what we would have given for an apple or apricot. We were supposed to be bivouacked here temporarily, a way station on our way to plunder, yet somehow we had become stuck. Our boredom made us benumbed, sluggish. We grew restless waiting for the fight, we grew so restless we fought each other, we grew so bored with fighting each other we grew even more restless. It should have been simple enough, we grumbled, a hitching of saddles, a mounting up, a setting forth, and then the great horsewave would move north in a hurricane of dust. Yet each morning passed with no more urgency than the collective desire of each man to find a place to piss in the prairie without stepping on another man's feces.

The camp was ankle-deep with our waste, with horse dung and human shit and the palm leaves we used to wrap mare's cheese, the charred wood, the ash, the balls of horsehair, the bits of straw and oat, and everywhere, the dried and aerated manure, blowing up around us in steady, soft, hot gusts.

How long would we stay here? How long could we stay here? An army grows

stale as sure as any bread, grows weary of being weary, loses edge and eagerness to fight. We were being bled of our will as surely as if we were actually bled.

When, oh when would the battle be joined? Where was our Great Leader?

The Great Leader finally appeared borne on a tented palanquin, a vast, square platform the length of four men a side, carried on the shoulders of twenty slaves, each holding a protruding beam. The palanquin moved slowly, unevenly. We were all surprised the Great Leader did not come by horse. But when we saw him emerge from his conveyance, we understood immediately: he had grown immense, so obese he could not longer mount a horse without crushing the poor beast. He wore a red, pink, and brown robe, a campaign tent's worth of fabric draped from his shoulders like a tarp over a statue. Pointy yellow slippers capped his impossibly tiny feet. We speculated that it was an act of exceeding dexterity on his part to stay upright and not teeter to one side or the other. It would have been faster and easier for everyone if he had simply lain down and allowed his attendants to roll him from the palanquin to campaign headquarters.

He had once led daring and ruthless raids against the State, interdicting rail lines, looting villages, ransoming officials. But now, it was hard to imagine him in the van of a column, requiring, as he did, this huge, unwieldy form of transport. He walked in slow, unsteady steps, his immense head tilted down, careful to measure the trail ahead lest a pebble or twig unsteady and topple him. His face was red from exertion, his thick, black beard springing in wiry tufts from his swollen red cheeks. He wore some sort of blackish mascara around his eyes, an affectation of his tribe, but the ink was running in black rivulets that joined his beard and gave his whole face below the eyes the appearance of a man trapped in a thick spider web. His crown, the heavy silver-and-gold tiara passed down from great horse leader to great horse leader, perched precariously atop his unkempt tangle of graying black hair, the crown designed a hundred years ago for a much smaller man.

The thought among all of us was: This is our Great Leader? This is the warrior king who will lead us into battle against the powerful State to the north? This is the mighty horseman whose very name inspired men to tremble and women to faint? He certainly had the girth of an entire horde, but did he have our loyalty?

Yes! we reasserted. Yes, we would follow him anywhere. He merely had to give us the command and into battle we would ride.

Our Great Leader lumbered up the wooden ramp and into his campaign palace,

a series of intersecting circular tents all affixed to a great tent mounted on a center pole twenty meters high with lion and horse sigil flying on pennants. Preceding him into that tent, in the days before his appearance, had been a bounty of wine, fruit, slaughtered and dried meat and a seraglio of dwarves, clubfoots, hermaphrodites, and dog boys. And finally came a stream of consultants and experts in the art of war, hired by the Great Leader from the finest and highest institutions of martial learning.

Would we really follow him?

Yes! Yes, we would.

A few years ago, the Great Leader had introduced the missionary sexual position to our society, and now he was experimenting with other imported ideas. It was announced that the Great Leader had been studying the ways of the modern State to the north and felt there was much to learn from these half-men.

We were told that the Great Leader was reviewing our battle formations, our war plans, and had proclaimed that we were living in a new era, that our old methods of raid and pillage were no longer the norms of modern combat. There were, he said, rules of engagement, a decorum of the battlefield, a method and system to warfare that must be observed by both parties; otherwise, the ensuing battle would be chaos.

We couldn't simply ride into the State's territory and rape and kill everything in our path—that was the old way of warfare, the Great Leader announced. The new way, the modern way, taught to him by consultants he had hired for the task, was to dismount, line up in orderly columns, with our shortest warriors in the front and our tallest in the back, and then march toward the enemy position, firing our carbines and launching our arrows when we were within range.

We were perplexed by this set of instructions. For one thing, most of us struggled to shoot or fire from a standing position; we were only comfortable on horseback. And for another, since when had the great horsewave, the great southern horde, ever directly engaged the enemy? Our method was to bypass the enemy position and fall upon him from behind or at dusk or even at night. But no, the Great Leader's consultants explained, the important thing, the honorable thing, was to defeat the enemy army on the field, and so win a clear and decisive victory, measured by tallying the corpses after the cessation of fighting.

We were confused.

* * *

War was inevitable, as ineluctable as the rising of the sun or the falling of night. We must go to war with the State; our relative strengths required it. They were ebbing, we were gaining, our conquest the logical result of this imbalance. This was how antagonistic cultures and races behaved: we shied from a fight when both sides were too equal. If one was stronger, as we were now, that equilibrium no longer held. When the State was strong, they pushed us south. Now we were strong and would push them north.

That was what brought the Great Leader here, to the center of the horde, to take command of the great horsewave that would wash over the State. And it was time to unleash the horde, we all agreed; our horses had grazed the pasture down to dust, our own foraging was returning nothing but nettles. We were already slaughtering spare mounts for meat.

The retraining was proceeding too slowly. Long meetings at which the consultants, wearing the jackets and buttons and decorations of uniformed, professional soldiers, would describe to us, sometimes with the aid of charts and maps they had made and mounted on easels, the techniques and methods of the campaign ahead. They gave us documents on which we were to answer a series of multiple-choice questions. They assured us that these “examinations” were simply to gather information about how much we knew about war making, and to identify areas where we might need improvement. They promised we were not being graded.

They explained to us that in modern battle, the best 10% of soldiers would perform well and be promoted to higher rank, the next 20% would survive, and the remaining 70% would either be dead or wounded. Our goal, the consultants explained, was to be among that top 10%, or at least in the top 30%. We should not, under any circumstances, settle for being in the bottom 70%.

The stark numbers gave us all pause. Was that true? Seven out of ten of us would be killed or maimed in the battle ahead? That put war in such a negative light. They were taking the fun out of it. At night, around our campfires, we would discuss what the consultants had been teaching us, their demonstrations of the proper posture to maintain during the advance—chin high, expression stern, chest thrown back, a confident stance wider than our shoulders, “the body language of victory,” we were told. And when we were shot, we were supposed to fall forward to lie facedown on the earth. That would make the tallying easier.

Meanwhile, the Great Leader remained ensconced in the splendor of his campaign tent, and in the evening, we could hear the lutes and zithers, the lotars, the chime of bell necklaces and bracelets affixed to the necks and hips of slave boys.

We endured his noisy entertainments, the laughter and grumbling and even the cacophonous farting of his courtiers, the high-pitched giggling of his eunuchs, the raised toasts of his consultants.

Our creeping sense of doubt about our prospects concerned us. For a horde, more than anything, must be confident, must be sure it will trample any opposition, must ride with brimming and unassailable swagger lest it pause before any of the many obstacles a horde may face. There were, the consultants reminded us daily, many obstacles. There were natural obstacles—rivers, mountains, deserts, and storms—and those thrown up by the enemy—the circular guns, the artillery, the trenches, the soldiers—and each of these the consultants continually and warily explained, belaboring the risks we faced. The consultants said our horde's advantage was in numbers. We outnumbered our enemy and therefore could afford to lose numerous engagements and still, after all the blood was shed, be a respectable horde. We were, they explained, like a school of fish or flock of sparrows; individual fish or birds would be constantly picked off and killed, but the whole body of organisms, the school, the flock, or, in our case, the horde, would survive. The strategy was, they explained, to use this numerical superiority to wear down the State, so that the horde would eventually prevail, though many of us would die before that happened. They showed us a diagram of how this would work, our horde represented by a lozenge shape, continually shrinking as it moved up north into the State. We were shown chart after chart, until finally the shriveled, tiny-but-still-lozenge-shaped horde arrived in the capital. Well, any horde would lose some enthusiasm when every day it was reminded of how perilous the very life of each individual hordesman was. We had never really thought in these terms before. We had never really thought about anything before, if we are being totally honest here. That had been one of the great pleasures of being a hordesman, that freedom from doubt and self-appraisal. We took great risks precisely because we didn't know they were great risks. If we had known, well . . .

Now some of us were becoming concerned about myriad issues related to the impending invasion. Not least the timing! There would soon be crops to be harvested, mares to be stitched, stallions to be gelded, goats to be slaughtered. This whole invasion was supposed to be wrapping up by now yet here we were, still mired in complicated preparations. When we complained about this scheduling conflict, we were told by the consultants that these preparations might seem

wasteful but once we were actually in battle we would be grateful. When we asked which battles they had actually fought, they admitted they hadn't actually, themselves, fought in any battles. They were usually on to their next campaign before the armies they had prepared went to war, such was the lot of the mercenary consultant. But they also explained that very few commanders had ever implemented their recommendations to the extent that our Great Leader was planning to do, which excited them greatly. Usually, they lamented, their suggestions were filed away in some campaign desk or officer's bureau and forgotten.

We would be a great test horde, they said, a great case study in the theories of warfare, brought to life! We would go down in history!

In the night, we heard horses saddled and swords, spears, and bows sheathed as some of our colleagues began to steal back to their families and yurts. Every morning, we would wake up to find fewer and fewer of our colleagues. Our horde was shrinking, our perceived numerical superiority dissipating. The consultants said this was normal, that all armies suffered from attrition. And the horde was noncompulsory. We warriors were summoned by the Great Leader, and we could either show up or stay home. It was strictly our choice. Those who didn't join the horde felt a certain shame or embarrassment, and that peer pressure was usually enough to sway every able-bodied man to the horsewave. We were now, however, experiencing the downside of those casual terms of service. A man could, if he so chose, take his horses and go home. And with the consultants still explaining their plans and the Great Leader debauching in his tent, our horde's loyalty was diminished.

This wasn't the great, thrilling invasion we had been promised. We hadn't killed anyone. There hadn't been a single rape. No booty at all. War was supposed to be fun, we reminded the consultants, who disagreed, insisting that war is serious business.

The change in the weather, the dry heat giving way to damp, thick air, augured the late summer rains. Soon, the steppes would be mud, a quagmire unsuited to our horsewave. The consultants shrugged at our warnings of the impending season change. It was clear their plans made no provision for atmospheric conditions.

If we attacked in the rain, how would be set the fires that would so terrify the villagers, how would our horses make pace, how would we forage? The invasion would be a slower, more drawn-out affair. We asked the consultants: what about

winter coats? We were prepared for the usual spring/summer campaign. This would be an autumn offensive, one that required, obviously, a different wardrobe. Again, the consultants had not factored this into their planning.

The camp was filthy, the hordesmen sluggish, the horses ropy and thin and dull-eyed. The greatest horde in history reduced to men biding time between dysentery bouts.

The Great Leader appeared, shirtless, his vast, hairy chest and stomach descending from his neck, layer upon layer of fat rolling over his belt, a cascading waterfall of hairy, human gut, his girth such that he looked like he could have swallowed a man whole. He still had his beard, and was now dusted with some kind of gold powdering so that his face shone in patches. Sweat dripped from his forehead, cutting rivulets into the gold coloring and causing gold to be smeared into his beard, as if he had just consumed a particularly messy dish of brightly colored food. He took his place outside the flaps of his campaign tent, beneath our standards and an intricate tarp of interlocked, vertical horses, held up over him for shade by six of his courtiers.

He announced he was there to address our concerns. Our Great Leader had a curious voice, soft and airy, thick with mucous and saliva so that if you were near him you could hear the strands of esophageal fluids separating as he spoke. He paused frequently, searched for words, making a great effort to sound eloquent and articulate when what we wanted, what we expected, were the usual shouts and cries of bloodlust and havoc. The Great Leader was supposed to remind us of our destiny, the horde's destiny: to kill, to pillage, to dismember and burn and grind human bones to dust. He was to pound the earth with his spear, then slaughter prisoners with a great ax and hold up their severed heads and promise us more, more, more. That's what the Great Leaders used to do.

But this Great Leader expressed a desire to address the recent complaints about the invasion process and the delays in implementing the consultants' recommendations. He wanted to kill as much as any of us, he reminded us, but we all had to adhere to the new process. It was better than the old process, more efficient, easier to measure, and scalable: it would work if we had a small horde or a large horde.

This was progress! he explained. And soon, very soon, we would be killing and raping and looting in an orderly and organized manner—

Then an archer's bolt, hissing through the air, found his eye socket. He continued speaking for a moment, promising victory, before he stopped, blinked with his

one remaining eye and reached up with his chubby hand and felt the shaft of the arrow that had penetrated his skull. He looked around, as if checking his vision, turned to see his courtiers and then back to the horde, trying to ascertain what was different now.

He paled, opened his mouth soundlessly. Seeming to either understand the severity of his wound or to actually be dying, he swayed, and while we stood in silence, fascinated by this spectacle of our Great Leader's assassination, he pitched forward, falling on his face and driving the arrow completely through his skull.

There, that *was* easy to count: one dead Great Leader.

The men of the horde were silent. When it was clear the Great Leader was dead, we wandered back to our tents. We gathered our bedding and cooking pots, our spare clothes and our good-luck talismans, we took up our armor, our robes, our guns and our swords and our bows and our arrows, we painted our faces and we brushed our horses and fed them what grain we had left.

We barely noticed when the consultants departed the camp—with the Great Leader dead there was no one to pay them. We paid little heed when the Great Leader's courtiers and minions and freaks and harlots were raped and butchered by our fellow hordesmen. We sent out riders to those who had returned to their families.

We were silent as we made our preparations, the traditional preparations that our fathers had made and their fathers before them.

We were silent as we went to war.