

ONE

Campi Catalaunici, Gaul, June 20, a.d. 451

The blackness of the heavens melded with the dark of the surrounding fields and woods, and the rain poured down on a scene of collective misery, the likes of which the world has rarely seen. It was as if even the gods were weeping for the fallen greatness of the empire, and for themselves.

A quarter of a million soldiers staggered in ragged formation along a dirt road whose ruts had long since turned into a quagmire. Each man's world was reduced to the tiny space around his own body—the tramping of hobnailed sandals, the dripping of water from helmet into eyes, the cold armor of the soldier in front of him, which he touched with his hand for reassurance that he was still following the right path in the darkness. As often as a soldier may train and drill with his legion, as far as he may march in close formation with a thousand comrades, as fiercely as he may fight as part of a vast body of troops, in the end, his survival depends not on his fellows or his enemies but on himself alone. No other man can endure for him the cold rain trickling down his back, the stabbing pain in his thigh where the spear point remains embedded, or the deep fear in his gut that this night, this night of agony and exhaustion, this last night, might not yield to dawn.

No light penetrated the sky, though in the distance, on the near horizon where lay the enemy camp, the sparks of a hundred thousand fires pierced the blackness like earthbound stars, as if the positions of Heaven and earth had been reversed. Close at hand, however, the only light was that which shone from the occasional pine-pitch torch stuck into the sodden earth of the ditch, or the lingering fire of an incendiary missile slowly guttering in a puddle of oily liquid. The dwindling flames seemed only to exaggerate the darkness by their infrequency, and as the column snaked slowly past, they cast quivering shadows on bloodied faces, on expressions constricted in grief and pain.

It was not the pain of physical injury, for a legionary is inured to that. A man who serves Rome by strength of his arms becomes resigned to leaving a part of himself behind in each campaign—a finger here, lopped off by a Germanic sword or a clumsy colleague's kindling hatchet; a slice of shoulder there, taken by an enemy catapult bolt or the teeth of a recalcitrant cavalry horse; an eye, the straightness of a nose, superfluous teeth, lost to brawling, or to rot, or to the ill-favored gift of a syphilitic prostitute. Yet perhaps this is only fair, to leave something behind, something personal, in exchange for the lives and treasure a soldier takes away in return. Veterans soon learn the tricks to remaining intact, for a soldier

cannot survive a twenty-year hitch in the legions and continue to lose a critical appendage every year—there would be little left of a man to enjoy his meager pension if that were the case. After a few years of experience, a man learns to temper his bravery. Not to shirk his duty, of course, but to not take needless chances, either—to volunteer for safer guard postings, to lag a fraction of a moment behind the front line in a charge, to keep a weather eye out for snipers on the flanks rather than focusing solely on the enemy directly in front of him. *Eyes to the east!* the inner voice of experience cries—for in direct, man-to-man combat, a Roman can dispatch any foe by using superior skill and technique, and even an Alaman's greater strength is actually diminished by his very blood rage; but a cool, calculating sniper aiming from behind a tree can only be avoided by experience. After a man loses two or three fondly remembered body parts, second sight becomes second nature.

Yet the pain these faces expressed went far beyond the usual degree of physical suffering. The armor was blood-spattered and dented. Limbs were bandaged, or missing, or hanging at odd angles. There was no talking or singing, not even the usual litany of complaints of an army on the march.

Only the incessant tramping and squelching, of half a million feet wending their way along the vast river of mud.

This very silence was a conundrum rarely encountered. Silence among Romans, a Roman silence, is a contradiction in terms, a condition that, like bare dirt in a lush forest, or a beautiful woman traveling alone, is unstable by the very laws of nature—a vacuum begs to be filled. And as if Stentor, that forgotten God of Clamor and Din, had blearily wakened for a moment and realized his inexplicable lapse, a sound of determined voices rose suddenly to the fore. The weary troops stumbled and hesitated in their sticky trudging, wanting to stop and listen, to experience the relief of knowing life existed beyond their own individual circles of darkness and damp, but each unwilling to lose contact with the shoulder in front of him, or be pushed into the mud and trampled by the unseen column of shades marching behind.

The clamorous voices became clearer, punctuated by oaths and the lusty braying of mules unhappy at the conditions under which they were being driven. A column of wooden wagons struggled along in the opposite direction from the troops, forcing its way through the weary wounded. Silently and grudgingly, by touch and by sound rather than by sight, the men stumbled into the ditch at the roadside and stood shivering in the rivulet of muddy water as the wagons passed by. Each vehicle was drawn by a pair of mules, their way lit by a field lantern mounted on a long pole arching over the animals' backs. The yellow lights glimmered weak and sickly on the faces of the auxiliaries walking beside the mules and the wagon wheels. They were young and green-looking—mere boys, hastily conscripted from a local village a few days before, lacking even the rudiments of armor and weaponry—and they stared at the exhausted soldiers they passed in wide-eyed amazement.

The leader of the wagon squadron, a burly centurion, stalked along the side of the road, whipping mules, wagon boys, and the surrounding troops indiscriminately as he worked to clear a path for his train. The weary legions, who only hours before had stood their ground against the fiercest enemies Rome had ever faced, now shrank into the darkness to avoid the sting of the leather mule strap wielded by one of their own. Every man has his job, and these troops had completed theirs. Driving a wagon train was this centurion's, and officers and common troops alike deferred to him and to his snarling whip.

As he passed, the centurion strode up and down his line of rumbling wagons shouting instructions in a clipped, military monotone.

“The truce will hold until sunrise, men! Ignore any Huns on the field—they’re looking to their own wounded. And remember the general’s warning—no looting! Any man I catch looting the dead, even dead Huns, will be flogged!”

With excruciating slowness the mule column strained up the short hill looming before them in the darkness. The tide of legionaries parted before them and re-formed behind them, in orderly, Roman formation. The only sounds were the exhausted veterans’ soft cursing as they were forced to halt their painful progress to stand in the ditch, and the centurion’s monotonous harangue.

“Just over this last hill, men. The truce will hold until sunrise. Eight hours to collect the wounded. Get those mules up to this crest. Almost there... *Good God!*”

The centurion stopped as he arrived at the top of the rise and peered over it at the battlefield. He subconsciously made the sign of the cross as the column of wagons behind him slowly ground to a halt.

Below him was a scene of appalling carnage. In the dying light of the sputtering puddles left by missiles, the vast plain was littered with the black, quavering shadows of bodies. Not thousands or tens of thousands but hundreds of thousands of men and horses, lying half-sunken in the churned-up mud, rain pelting their prone forms, turning everything—mud, bodies, the very darkness itself—into a thick soup, the ground barely distinguishable from the bodies and the bodies from the darkness.

After staring for a moment, he began to perceive the individual elements of the scene. The field was not still—rather, it was a vast, writhing quagmire, slowly churning and rippling like the surface of a Saxon bog. Some of the forms crawled weakly or dragged themselves; others lifted a feeble limb as if beckoning to one another; most lay perfectly still. Wild dogs and pigs scurried stealthily among the bodies, and other groups of wagons and stretcher bearers were already hard at work, carrying the wounded and stacking the dead.

In silent horror, the young soldiers of the wagon train gathered behind the centurion and peered over his shoulder. It was a hellish sight, and the young crew froze in shock. The centurion, however, was not one for long pondering.

“Get to work! At daybreak the truce is off. I want all the wounded in by then. *All of them!* The dead we’ll burn later.”

With a crack of his whip and more curses from the marching legionaries forced into the ditch, the wagon train lurched forward over the crest and began its slow, careful descent down the muddy hill to the edge of the field, where the vehicles fanned out to the largest clusters of dark shapes littering the plain.

Two young Gauls, pressed into service with the Roman ambulance crew only three weeks before, picked their way slowly through the mud and moaning bodies.

“I didn’t enlist with the legions to be dragging Romans out of the mud.”

“Shut up. You didn’t enlist at all. Father ordered us to go because the prefect ordered him to send us. What’d you expect—to get conscripted as a general?”

“No, but at least to do some fighting, kill a Hun or two...”

“Shut up, I said. Help me turn this one over—”

The brothers stooped and grunted as they lifted a prone soldier to flip him onto his back. The mud grudgingly yielded its grip on the man’s body with a wet, squelching sound.

“Dead. Leave him. Let’s get this one over here. I saw his leg move.”

Heaving the injured man onto the filthy stretcher, they trundled the load to their wagon, where the mules stood stoically in the driving rain. The wounded Roman moaned softly with the swaying of the stretcher, and the two Gauls, cursing as they tripped and stumbled through the darkness, did little to smooth his ride.

“Watch it, idiot. Can’t you see his arm’s almost falling off?”

“Tie it across his chest so it doesn’t dangle. Do I have to do everything in this outfit?”

Laying the stretcher on the wagon’s lowered tailgate, they slowly slid him off the blood-soaked canvas and onto the floorboards, settling him tightly between two others they had already picked up.

“Room for two more. Get going.”

“How about that one? He’s moving...”

The brothers approached with their stretcher and bent down to peer at the injured man’s face in the dim light.

“Nah—he’s a Hun. Yellow as a sunflower, if it weren’t for the mud. Half-naked, too. Huns don’t even have enough sense to wear metal.”

“I don’t see as you have any armor yourself.”

“Shut up—there’s some Huns now!”

The Gauls stopped in mid-squat and stared. Several yards away, two figures strode through the field, their dark leather cuirasses gleaming wetly in the light of the scattered fires. Each bore a six-foot spear, though no other weapons that could be seen, and they, too, bent here and there to examine a prone figure in the mud.

“Are they doing the same thing as we are?”

“Picking up wounded? Why not?”

“How’re they going to carry them? They’ve got no stretcher or wagon.”

As the Gauls watched, the Huns toed a shadowy figure on the ground to turn him over. The injured man weakly twitched an arm. One of the Huns, apparently the more senior, growled something to the other in a guttural tongue and then stalked on to investigate more movement several yards away. The other paused a moment, as if waiting for his leader to step away, then placed the tip of his pike carefully on the throat of the injured man lying at his feet, and leaned heavily onto the shaft. The injured man’s arm jerked up suddenly, once, then flopped lifelessly into the mud. The Hun seized his shaft and jerked it out.

He then glanced up and saw the two Gauls observing him. For a moment he stood motionless, leaning on his pike as if deep in thought, while the brothers gingerly fingered their belts, hoping they had remembered to attach their sheath knives. Then, with a grin that gleamed yellow in the firelight, the Hun nodded slightly and strode on to join his comrade, who was pointing out another injured soldier.

“Almighty God in Heaven! Did you see that? They’re murderers, of their own men! Should we kill them?”

“*Kill them?* Look at their weapons, man; look at their armor—those men aren’t conscripts like us; they’re real soldiers.”

“But...”

“Don’t get any ideas. The centurion said no contact with the Huns. They’re doing their business, and we’re doing ours. Let’s just get on with it.”

Behind them, one of the mules snorted, and both men jumped.

“Not much more room in the wagon bed. Time we picked up a couple more and got back to camp.”

As the two men again began slowly making their way through the carnage, a thin voice rose out of the darkness.

“Romans!...Ah, for God’s sake, over here...”

An arm gestured weakly from a mound of cadavers the Gauls had purposely avoided thus far, being many yards from the nearest fire, its gory details shrouded in darkness.

“There’s a live one in there. Hurry...”

The two soldiers rushed over, seized the arm, and tugged the wounded man free of the cadavers on top of him, laying him in the mud on his back.

“I can’t see a damned thing. Drag him over here.”

Cursing softly as they slipped in the mud, the two bent and lifted the wounded man onto the stretcher, then slowly began carrying him away. As they passed in front of a sputtering fire, however, the elder of the two suddenly swore and dropped his burden. His brother, caught off guard by the sudden shift, staggered backward, then released his own grip on the two poles.

“Idiot! What’d you drop him for?”

“Look at him! He’s a Hun!”

The two peered at him closely in the dim light. The wounded man wore a Roman battle helmet but no armor, only a woolen camp tunic and cavalry boots.

“You’re right—an old Hun, and an ugly one at that. Looted a Roman helmet from somewhere. Get him off the stretcher.”

“Wait. He called out to us in Latin.”

The injured man interrupted the bickering above him with a wet cough, weakly struggling to sit up between the two poles of the stretcher on which he lay.

“Romans, please...wait!” he gasped, in rough camp Latin. “I have information for you...”

The Gauls squatted in front of him. “Information? Well, you’re taking up space a Roman boy could use. Spit it out, old man, and be done with it.”

“My information is for your general alone.”

The Gauls stared at him incredulously.

“You expect us to take you to General Flavius Aetius? Just like that? Every Hun here would ask for the same thing.”

“Huh! Beats being skewered in the throat by their own men, don’t it?”

The Gauls laughed, but the wounded Hun coughed again and gripped the stretcher poles tightly with his hands to keep from being tipped out.

“Please...take my purse. It’s on a string at my belt...”

One of the Gauls looked around carefully to see whether anyone was watching, then bent, groped the Hun’s thin waist, and tore away a leather purse. He stood back up, stealthily peering inside.

“The centurion told us there was to be no looting.”

“But the old man’s got money—gold!”

“Probably looted it along with the helmet, before he took a sword in the gut himself.”

The Hun spoke up again.

“Please...there isn’t much time.”

The soldiers glanced at each other and nodded. Then they bent to the stretcher, staggered back to the wagon, and roughly heaved him in. After adjusting the cargo for a moment, they stood back to appraise their work.

“What do you think—room for one more?”

“Yes—come on.”

The Gauls moved off slowly to seek one more wounded Roman soldier but after several paces stopped suddenly in their tracks, listening.

Hoofbeats and baying dogs—riders were rapidly approaching. In the darkness and rain, all sense of direction was lost—the commotion could have been coming from anywhere. The two turned slowly where they stood, bewildered. They were no strangers to the sound of hoofbeats, but the baying was not that of a normal hound—it was deeper and throatier, mingled with a vicious snarling. The soldiers tensed, and again began nervously fingering their belts. Suddenly, a trio of huge northern wolves, long neck fur flaring out like manes, raced past a nearby fire, tugging at the ropes of the Hunnish handlers behind them. The Gauls stared in astonishment.

“Did you see? Are those...?”

“I’d heard the Huns kept wolves, like General Aetius, but I didn’t believe it...”

The huge beasts leaped over bodies on the ground and then stopped, growling, at the pile of corpses from which the old Hun had just been pulled. Snorting and snuffling, they milled about angrily, confused.

A new torrent of rain burst from the sky, and just as the Gauls ducked their heads for cover, a dozen Hunnish horsemen, shouting in their harsh language, thundered out of the darkness, surrounding them with their snorting, pawing horses. Their leader, a commanding figure, loomed over the terrified boys. He wore no metal but only the grimy, worn leather battle gear they had seen on the other Hunnish soldiers. His only distinction of rank was the matted fur trim around the collar and sleeves of his tunic. He was broad-shouldered and muscular, with a controlled physical strength that belied the fury in his face. He glared down at the two cowering Gauls, eyes glittering in the torchlight, avid as a lion's when staring down at its quarry from a low branch.

The leader nodded to one of his mounted comrades, and the two of them suddenly maneuvered their animals behind the Gauls, bent down from their horses, and pressed long knives to the soldiers' necks. The conscripts froze in terror; a sudden shift by a horse, and their throats could be slashed. They stared up, motionless, the rain coursing down their faces. The commander leered as he jerked the younger Gaul's chin up and brandished his weapon before the frightened man's eyes. It was a steel blade with a finely wrought serrated edge such as the Gaul had never before seen. It reminded him of an animal's teeth, and he shuddered.

"Look lively, Roman jackals!" the leader snarled at them in perfectly accented Latin. "Did you see an old Hun pass this way earlier?"

The Gauls could barely stand on their feet for fear. The younger one opened his mouth to speak—*give away the goods; save your skin!* his inner voice cried. But before he could croak a word, the lead horseman interrupted him.

"If I find you Romans have sheltered this man in any way, then the night truce is over. Your heads will decorate my tent poles. Search their wagon."

The Huns released their grip and the two Gauls sank to their knees, weak with terror. Two other Huns in the party dismounted and began walking toward the wagon with a lit torch. Just as they approached it, an Ostrogoth horseman thundered up breathlessly out of the darkness.

"Great King!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "The wolves are baying at a fresh scent! If we hurry, we may still be able to find the old man alive!"

The two Gauls glanced at each other wide-eyed. The elder whispered to his brother out of the corner of his mouth.

"'Great King'? It's Attila himself!"

The Hunnish commander wheeled his horse about and shouted an order in his strange tongue. The other horsemen galloped off, and the two Huns who were moving to inspect the wagon quickly re-mounted and raced away after them. The leader lingered a moment longer, glaring down at the two brothers, fingering his serrated blade as if in thought. Then viciously whipping his horse, he thundered off after his men.

The two overwhelmed Gauls staggered back to the wagon. There they stared at the injured old Hun, who peered back at them with rheumy eyes, as he passed in and out of consciousness. A trickle of blood

glittered in the dim light as it flowed down the corner of his mouth. The soldiers stood up straighter and tried to recover their former bravado. The elder slapped the old Hun on the foot.

“Well, with all the trouble you’ve caused, we’ve got to take you back to camp now. You’d better be worth it.”

One body short, they turned the mules around and began the long trek back down the road from which they had come.

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Neat rows of canvas tents, each fronted by a smoldering cooking fire for the ten men who slept inside, flanked a narrow dirt path that had deteriorated into a deep-rutted river of mud. Smoke hovered low on the ground, as if pressed down by the rain, and as the weary legionaries trudged into camp and dispersed to their units their exhausted faces were lit fleetingly by the fires and torchlight. A column of wooden wagons was lined up before a large tent, the camp’s field hospital, and men moved frantically around the placid mules, shouting orders and rushing up with medical supplies. They methodically unloaded the carts of their grim burdens, and the open space in front of the hospital tent became ever more thickly filled with moaning bodies. The prone men were packed so closely that orderlies were forced to roll them onto their sides, regardless of the location of their injuries, spooning them against one another to allow room for the endless quantities of new wounded who continued to arrive. The suffering men were not even sheltered from the rain. Many were unconscious, but those who were awake groaned feebly, calling for blankets, for food, for their wives, for their mothers.

At the unloading station, the two Gauls stood arguing with their commanding centurion, who was apoplectic with rage.

“Damn you two lunkheads by all the bloody gods of Gaul! General Aetius has lost a hundred thousand men or more this day. *A hundred fucking thousand men!* And you want me to bring him a half-dead old Hun because he speaks a bit of Latin? My stable boy speaks better Latin than this old hound, and I wouldn’t bring him to meet Aetius!”

The two soldiers quailed, but the elder spoke up meekly.

“I swear, sir, it was Attila himself, hunting him down! He must know something...”

The centurion cursed in exasperation, at the thickheadedness of the Gauls, at the freezing rain that was pouring down his back, at the overwhelming fatigue he felt after fighting in the lines all day and now working in the dead wagons all night.

“Attila. Right. You’ve been hitting the grape juice again, boy. Get your sorry ass back to work. We’ve still got half the night left. I’ll deal with the Hun now, and you two later.”

The soldiers shrugged, slapped the mules, and began the hike back out to the field with the empty wagon to pick up more wounded. As they waded away, the centurion watched them with disgust, then looked down at the unconscious Hun with an expression of equal distaste.

“So what the hell am I supposed to do with you, eh?”

Bending down, he slapped both sides of the Hun’s face lightly several times in an attempt to waken him.

“Speak up, Hun. I can’t hear you. Ah hell.”

The centurion picked up the old man as easily as if he were a sack of barley, threw him over his shoulder, and trudged off.

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The tent was large, airy, and well lit, roomy and comfortable by military standards, though by any standards other than military it was slovenly and cramped. Maps and documents were strewn on a table and spilled onto the rough plank flooring, and aides bustled in and out, shaking off water and scraping muddy boots. Rain hammered on the sodden canvas, and the wind shook the fabric so that it seemed to vibrate like the skin of a drum, forcing all inside to raise their voices to be heard. Furniture and papers had been hastily stacked in mounds, away from the seams of the fabric—for under these, at the needle holes, even liberal application of lard and wax had failed to stem the effects of the downpour, and long strings of water beads formed on every edge where two pieces of fabric were joined. A gust of wind that swelled the tent, or a clumsy shoulder brushing against the canvas wall, would send a row of cold droplets onto the heads of those sitting below, and the sound of the driving rain outside was periodically accompanied by angry curses within.

At a table and bench in the middle of the tent, General Flavius Aetius sat conferring with half a dozen of his officers. All were dressed still in the field armor they had been wearing for the past sixteen hours, and all were soaked and filthy—none had bathed or eaten since their own return from the battle-field hours before.

Their faces were grim and exhausted, but Aetius remained calm and unflappable. A tall, lean man, he had a highbred look and patrician bearing, though without the vacant stare or excess of emotion of those who come by their position undeservedly. He exuded quiet confidence and competence, and his officers sat before him tensely as he questioned them about the army’s current situation.

“What’s the casualty count?”

Pellus, a veteran tribune from Dacia, squinted at a torn scrap of parchment he held in his hand, struggling to make sense of the figures he had scrawled a few moments before from the reports of his field centurions.

“General Aetius—our preliminary estimate, before darkness fell, was three hundred thousand casualties on the field. No idea how many are Huns, how many are ours...”

There was a collective sucking of breath from the men present. Though every one of them was a hardened veteran, accustomed to witnessing death and sending his troops into the maw of combat, these

figures were unheard of. Three hundred *thousand*? Never in history had a single battle destroyed so many lives.

A second tribune, Antony, cleared his throat and continued the summary.

“The ambulance squads are out now, sir, picking up survivors. After they return we’ll have a more accurate count.”

Pellus resumed the thread of his report.

“The worst of it is, sir, reports say that King Theodoric was found beneath a mound of dead Huns.”

At this news, Aetius looked up in shock.

“Theodoric? What was his condition, Tribune?”

“Dead,” Pellus rejoined. “Witnesses say he took an Ostrogoth javelin that knocked him off his horse. He got up fighting but in the end was overwhelmed. Wounds in all the proper places. He died bravely, that one, battling like a *primus pilus*.”

Aetius shook his head in dismay. “The idiot. I have plenty of men to fight like centurions. I needed him to command like a king.”

He paused for a moment, considering this latest turn.

“The Visigoths are our largest ally—that leaves them with no commander.”

Antony leaned forward, dropping his voice.

“Correct, sir—all two hundred thousand of them. Even now, word is spreading through the camp. The Visigoths are confused, leaderless. Some vow vengeance under his eldest son, Thorismund, while others say they’ll return to Tolosa, to prepare his funeral.”

Aetius remained calm and silent, thinking. The others bore shocked expressions, the look of men who had lost everything. Finally, Pellus cleared his throat.

“General Aetius, a decision is needed,” he said hesitantly. “The Visigoth king is dead. His two hundred thousand men may not fight. We have lost—”

“I heard you perfectly well the first time,” Aetius stopped him. “We have lost nothing.”

Sudden shouts from outside interrupted the conversation. The men pricked up their ears at the commotion and stood to investigate.

“You men are dismissed,” Aetius growled as he stood up. “Antony, get a more accurate casualty count and check in again at the next watch.” He shouldered past them toward the tent opening, muttering in annoyance at this new disruption. “What the hell is going on now?”

Lifting the door flap, he strode out into the rain.

In the river of mud fronting the tent, a centurion stood arguing with two of Aetius’ guards, who had prevented him from approaching the general’s field headquarters. The old Hun lay on the ground at the centurion’s feet, wrapped in a sodden blanket, eyes half-open, shivering and gazing around in befuddlement. Aetius approached and pushed through, confronting the men in irritation.

“Centurion—what’s the meaning of this? Have you nothing better to do on such a night?”

The centurion snapped to surprised attention at the appearance of the high commander himself.

“General Flavius Aetius! Greetings to you sir, from the Tenth Legion, and all due respect. My ambulance crew encountered this Hun—” he toed the half-conscious old man, eliciting a moan of pain—“who insists on talking to you. Claims to have vital information. Sir.”

Aetius glanced down curiously at the Hun, but his face registered no emotion. The injured man stared up at him, his eyes gradually focusing and widening in recognition. With difficulty, he removed his hand from the folds of the bloody, rain-soaked blanket that enveloped him like a shroud, and extended his closed fist to Aetius.

Aetius bent down and held out his own hand, and the Hun dropped something into it. The general stood and held the object to the torchlight for examination. It was a polished, yellowed fang, dangling from a plain leather thong, a common-enough talisman among the Huns. And yet it bore a *tamga*, a property mark—unusual for such a valueless thing as this. He held it closer to the light. There, he could barely make it out—a crudely carved letter “A.”

The general started in surprise and stared back down at the Hun. The face—at first he had not recognized it, but now there was no mistake. That broken nose, which had healed so badly...

“Centurion, bring this man into the tent immediately. Guard—call a physician.”

The guard sprinted away. The centurion bent and heaved the Hun again onto his shoulder, striding toward the tent opening. Aetius followed close behind.

Ducking inside the tent, the centurion deposited the Hun onto the general’s cot with a grunt, then stood and saluted smartly with upraised hand. Aetius nodded to him absentmindedly and stepped toward the cot, but the centurion remained standing. The general turned to look at him a moment, at this burly veteran covered with mud and soaked to the skin, his tunic and armor streaked with blood from the wounded man he had been carrying. The centurion remained at stiff attention, eyes expressionless, staring straight ahead.

“At ease, man. What are you waiting for, a medal?”

The trooper flinched slightly, dropped his upraised hand, but remained motionless, and suddenly it dawned on Aetius why. For the first time in hours the man was out of the rain, and he was reluctant to venture back to the field again so soon.

The general’s expression softened slightly. “To the guard shack with you. Tell the armorer I sent you for a cup of hot wine. I know he keeps it behind the forge.”

“For the prisoner, sir?” the centurion inquired.

Aetius turned away. “The prisoner? He’s barely conscious, soldier. Drink it yourself, and back out to the field!”

The centurion nodded, still expressionless, and then strode impassively out the door flap. Aetius stood for a moment listening to the splashing footsteps fade away outside. Then sighing deeply, he seized a nearby oil lamp and bent over the Hun. Though the lamplight shone close, the injured man’s eyes did not even flicker.

Aetius examined the face closely, taking in the features, so familiar yet so changed with the years. Could he himself have changed as much? A man's face and body mature, then decay, becoming almost unrecognizable over time. But does his core remain fixed, as when one takes an ax, swings it at a tree, and bites all the way to a sapling that witnessed the march of Julius Caesar? This old man in front of him—was he the same man Aetius had known? Was he here out of friendship? Or something else?

A deafening burst of rain pounded on the tent canvas, like a volley of arrows striking a shield. Aetius pulled a camp stool up to the cot and sat down. He had barely settled into position when the door flap opened again, sending a spray of water into the tent.

A miserable-looking civilian stumbled in, nearly tripping over an enormous ball of fur curled up on a woven mat in the middle of the floor. The fur ball twitched in irritation, looked up with gleaming yellow eyes, and emitted a menacing growl.

“Lucilla! Hush!” Aetius ordered.

“Greetings, General Aetius,” the man mumbled anxiously. “You called for a physician? With all due respect, sir, that wolf makes me nervous.”

“She's tame. She hasn't eaten a doctor in days.”

The man's eyes opened wide and he edged carefully around the glowering animal, who fixed a hungry stare on him. Finally putting Aetius between himself and the beast, the physician sidled over to the brazier in the middle of the tent with slow and deliberate movements, as if reestablishing his wounded dignity. He removed his felted woolen cloak, on which the droplets had settled like tiny pearls, and stretched it over the back of a chair. He then calmly removed his felt cap and ran a hand through his hair, allowing more droplets to fall onto the hot metal at the edge of the brazier, where they jumped and spat. Finally, glancing at Aetius, who eyed him coldly, he nodded his readiness and strode to the cot to venture his first look at the patient he had been called to examine. His face immediately registered distaste.

“General Aetius—this man is a Hun!”

Aetius sighed deeply. “This is news to me?”

The physician blinked in surprise, then averted his gaze. Between the yellow eyes of the wolf and the impassive stare of the general, he felt as if stage lanterns were being trained on his face. He bent down self-consciously to rummage through his medical kit, grunting and mumbling to himself, then grudgingly set to work, unwrapping the Hun's sodden blanket and cutting away the woolen tunic. As he carefully lifted away the fabric, snipping the fibers where dried blood had adhered to the man's skin, he glanced at Aetius and shook his head in dismay.

The general leaned over the physician's shoulder to see for himself and winced. He stepped back for a moment, staring at the low ceiling as if composing his thoughts. Then, edging around the hunched form of the physician, he bent down, seized the Hun's face with his hand, and turned it toward him.

“What is it? Why are you here?”

The wounded Hun started at the sound of the general's voice and his eyelids fluttered open. His eyes, however, remained unfocused and distant, and his mouth worked laboriously.

"Must tell Flavius...Must...tell Flavius!"

"Tell me what? Old man, why have you come?!"

The physician sat back and gently removed Aetius' hand from the patient's face, respectfully but firmly shouldering him aside. The general stepped back slightly, though his eyes never left those of the old Hun. As the physician carefully adjusted a bent flange on a set of metal tongs, he conversed with Aetius, seeking both to inform him and to distract him.

"The man won't last another day, General. I would be surprised if he survived the night. If I may ask: Who is he?"

Aetius paused for a moment before responding.

"This man..."

At a sudden loss for words, he looked across the room, staring into space.

"This man," he continued, "he used to be a Hun."

The physician scoffed.

"'Used to be'? They don't get more Hunnish than this specimen. So what is he now?"

Aetius looked down sadly at the dying man and held his silence. The physician observed him for a long moment, and then, fearing that his question had been forgotten or ignored, he screwed up his courage to interrupt the general's thoughts.

"General Aetius, as a matter of professional interest and...personal curiosity—what is this man now?"

Aetius sighed and stood up straight. Composing his face, he fixed his gaze firmly on the physician.

"Forty years, it's been. Forty years and more. No, physician, this man is no mere Hun."

"Ah. You know him then? A captured enemy officer, perhaps?"

Aetius shook his head. "No, not just an officer, though he is that, too. Keep him alive, physician, alive at all costs."

The physician's eyes gleamed at the trust the great man had placed in him.

"So this Hun, he is of quite some importance then?"

Aetius nodded and once again bent to examine the wounded man's face.

"Physician," he said, "at this moment, he may be the most important man in the Roman Empire."