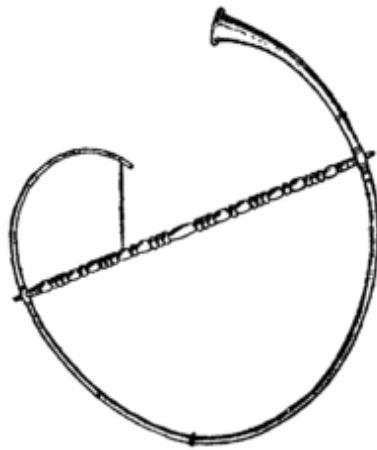


GUILT

By
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He awoke, eyes fluttering open to a half-light. Face down in mud, there was no pain but no memory either. Raising his head slightly, he saw scratches in the sodden ground next to his hand. As he pushed himself up into a sitting position, the marks became letters – ‘BUCCINATOR’.

The young man could make nothing of that, deciding to file it away for consideration later.

As he stood, a building became visible in the wide valley below, just a few minutes walk away. He set off, without looking back.

Rain again, but he hardly noticed, soaked as he was already. Nearing the building – the hostelry, yes, he remembered now – a realisation struck him; he had been there before.

Flashes and images slewed past the numbness in his mind, dreamlike memories of warm days and a long journey. It was cold here, so cold, and he had travelled so far. Even moving, there was no warmth to be found.

The distance closed, the building rearing out of the rain.

The front door hung off its hinges. Stepping inside cautiously, for there was little light as darkness closed without, he waited for his eyes to adjust. His vision did not improve, no matter how he blinked or squinted. He wondered at that.

Straining, he could make out smashed pots, plates, mugs, stools, benches, tables and stop!

Bodies – many broken bodies, torn, bloody and worse.

The man stumbled against a post, unbalanced by shock. What had happened here?

The destruction drifted out of focus as a veil settled over his mind’s eye, a bright and cheerful filter smothering the now, in warm glow. Other memories flooded in with this soothing light: singing, laughter, women.

They had travelled all the way to the northern edge of the world, he and his... friends? Or were they comrades? Were they both, perhaps? Once here, and stuck for the next twenty-five years, making the best of it was all they could realistically do. Getting blind drunk seemed as good a beginning as any. His evening had ended in vomit – he had worn most of it. The recollection brought a smile to his face. He checked his tunic and, yes, the stains were still there, on his chest. This memory was clearly a recent one. Vaguely, he recalled being helped to a bunk for what remained of the night.

The smile faded quickly as he made his way through a charnel house to the room he believed to be his; or rather the one in which he had finally passed out.

His breath caught upon entering. On the bunk was a buccina, a long, curved war horn. Stooping to pick the instrument up and feeling it in his hands, he knew it was his. Instinctively knew it. Lifting it to his lips, he blew. The single, baleful note resonated, drawing lost memories howling through his mind like furies.

The first recollection was panic and shouting, men running and banging doors. Helping hands had dragged him indelicately to his feet, shoving him from the room. A rough male voice bellowed, “Move! Or it’ll be a flogging!”

His mind flooded with further recollections of his squad route marching up to the crags whence he had awoken, just minutes ago, to answer a call for help. The soldier stepped out into the ever pouring rain once more. Lost in memories, he retraced his earlier steps while black clouds burdened the dusk, smothering the broken teeth of the ridge in a heavy, deepening grey.

Could it really have been only this morning when his company had scaled this crop of rocks, in arms? He neared the ridge, surrounded by the shades of his companions, frantically shuffling for position. His mind recreated every detail of the armed men on horseback, bearing down on them from both sides.

They were strange creatures, these men – feral, painted and vicious. Worse still, they were many.

Outnumbered, the only escape routes available to his troop, were through the enemy or over a cliff. Ill-equipped and sick, how had he survived?

That was this morning. This evening, the solitary soldier toiled back up to the crags, slipping and cursing into the all enveloping night. Striding away disoriented and numb, he had not seen the bodies earlier – but they were everywhere.

Panic tore through him like a gale. “If I can just get help,” the young man spluttered frantically, over and over, to no one who could hear. “By all the gods, I need help!”

Reaching for his buccina, he stared along the arch of its length, feeling the many little dents with his fingers. Dents he had allowed to happen over the long journey from home. Damage he had paid for with a beating, more than once.

A brief moment of clarity bloomed as the scratches in the mud, where he had awoken, swam before his eyes. “I’m the buccinator! The bearer of the war horn,” he breathed the words. A frigid wind tore them away, instantly. To the instrument he said, “I didn’t have you earlier, when you could have done some good. I was drunk and sick and I left you behind. Even the chance that help might have come to your call may have been enough to give those savage animals second thoughts – may have saved my friends’ lives.”

He took a deep breath and wound the horn again and again, for several minutes. Finally spent, he sat on a rock, looking away from the destruction of so many young lives.

The rolling moorland was completely deserted. Unsure what could be achieved by continuing the call, he steeled himself to walk among the bodies of his friends – yes, friends. Indeed, in this wild, inhospitable land of wolves and dark gods, how could he have ever questioned their status as such? Some of the injuries were terrible, unnecessary and born more of malice than of war.

Presently, he came full circle, to the word scratched in the mud and the body adjacent. The icy drizzle had obscured the letters now. Some were completely unrecognisable. He turned the face over and stared for a moment before collapsing to his knees, looking down deep into dead eyes. He arched back, crying out to the bloated skies like a tortured animal. He screamed until his voice cracked before finally falling down, rocking uncontrollably; his sobs almost suffocating.

He knew the face like it was his own, because it had been – he was looking at his own corpse.

Lost and indescribably alone, the young man was paralysed for many minutes until movement in the distance caught his eye. Getting stiffly to his feet once more, he wiped away his tears to see more clearly.

Miraculously, from the south-west a line of torches flickered brightly, moving through what remained of the twilight. The steady thrum of horses’ hooves at slow gallop grew louder, coming and going on the wind.

He quickly bent to pick up the buccina, prepared his breathing in the way he had been trained and blew the horn several times. A dozen or so men split from the group, heading for the hostelry, whilst the lion’s share of the force headed straight for him; perhaps eighty men and horse in all.

Trapped in the darkest weave of nightmare, he prayed helplessly, hoping that all could still somehow be righted.

The men slowed and dismounted, approaching the bodies on foot. The buccinator noted similarities in dress between these newcomers and himself, but with little differences setting them apart as their own. Though they seemed to have heard the call of his horn, they neither saw nor heard *him*. Looking down at the buccina in his hands, he wondered if it, or any of it, was real.

Exhausted beyond endurance, he succumbed and lay, literally *by* himself, in the muck. In this half state, his mind fixed upon lost love; the girl from whom he had been pressed when the soldiers came. Her face was the merest flicker in the darkness closing around his mind. Shutting his eyes tightly to hold her memory safe, he slipped away.

Warmth, he could feel it on his skin. He opened his eyes to a day bright and cloudless blue, even as the sun was low in the sky – the Ides of October. Rising, he walked to the top of the hill and sat alone on its craggy spine, seeing not a living human soul all afternoon or evening.

He closed his eyes.

When he awoke, it was to a storm. Torrential rains and gale force winds laid the grasses flat to the southern side of the slope. He crouched and shivered for many freezing hours before oblivion came for him once more.

Each awakening was to a new reality, but never an inch from his situation – the place he had fallen that day, scratching a reminder of what he should have been into the hillside for his soul to bear.

Rain, shine, snow, storm – upon his crag, the solitary soldier endured...

Days blurred until he awoke to something new. His eyes opened to see men, many men, everywhere. Mules and ponies laboured, carrying stone to workers who were making the most of fair weather during the last days of an unusually extended building season. Almost all of them looked like soldiers, so the uniforms were familiar, but not entirely. They were building what seemed to be a huge footing, suitable for a wall fully ten feet wide and already stretching many, many yards in both directions.

As the sun began to set, he wound his buccina, his one method of communication with the world around him, and laughed, a deep belly laugh, for the first time in what seemed and felt like decades. His mirth, born from relief of being alone no longer mixed with the startled reactions of the workers, buoyed him.

The builders left site in a hurry that evening.

When he awoke next, the men were gone and a huge wall crowned the top of his crag. Fifteen feet high and lime-washed white, it was crenulated along the top of its north face and appeared to run far into the distance in both directions. The vast structure was dazzling in the otherworldly light of a westering sun, and to the west, he could just make out an encampment where men and animals laboured still.

“Why am I still here?” he asked of the wind. “All come and go, yet I remain. Why?”

It was the Ides of October. It was *always* the Ides of October.

He cried softly, alone again.

The wall and towers rose and decayed, were renewed and decayed once more. Finally, they began to shrink as if the stones were being robbed by the men of the land. During his lonely sentinel, he had lost count of the times this dark crag had greeted his waking eyes.

The landscape changed slowly as buildings came and went with the movement of man. Roads decayed into muck and ridges, moving slightly hither or thither as they were made, remade and over-made by successive generations.

He watched it all, but no longer cried in loneliness. His tears shed long ago.

He closed his eyes.

One...

Ancient lids flutter open, only to squint into the bright sunshine of another pastoral scape of greens and greys under blue, almost unchanged – the Ides of October. However, the lost soldier’s post seemed less lonely than it once had, and he thanked the gods for it. For many dozens of October Ides now, he had seen people, many people, all in outlandish barbarian

garb. Their numbers seemed to increase each year. Even foul weather never dissuaded them or seemed to dampen their enjoyment of what must surely have been a wretched journey. It was puzzling, but so glad was he to see them that he cared not.

This day, he heard a scrambling from the cliff face and approached to look over the edge. To his surprise, two men in brightly reflective coats and strangely shaped helmets were attempting to scale the cliffs. He did a double take – no, one of them was a woman! He could hardly believe his eyes. They made use of strange, magical ropes of many colours, looped through metal hoops and weirdly crafted accoutrements, the like of which he had never seen before.

Over the centuries, a fairly easy path had emerged to either side of the crags and he often watched people stroll lengthwise along the wall's ruin. However, this latest scene baffled him. Why should they take such a route when an obvious safe path was so near? Why would a woman be dressed as a man and climbing rocks at all, for that matter?

Then, with the inevitability of a falling stone – to his mind at least – one of the fixtures gave way. The man plummeted, twenty feet or more, collecting the woman on his way down. They both screamed, hitting the ground hard.

Moans and small, breathless cries reached the top of the cliffs. They must have survived, for the moment at least.

His remaining humanity tormented him; he wished only to reach out and help these poor souls but was powerless to do so.

Looking around hopelessly for inspiration, his eye finally alighted on the buccina. Still propped against a rock – his rock – she was his only companion through these many years. He ran to her, raising her to his lips. She made a braying, parping noise as he blew, which may even have been comical had it not so often been the harbinger of war. All across the known world, down centuries of carnage, through battles and fields beyond counting, her voice sang death or salvation for someone.

For almost two millennia, that long-gone morning of hangover and vomit had anguished the buccinator's mind. Fretting to the point of near insanity, he had never stopped wondering whether the buccina, his simple horn, could have averted the tragedy which was to shape his eternity.

He blew once more, throwing all the pain of two thousand days over two thousand years of sorrow behind the effort. Long forgotten tears streamed down his cheeks as he wound the horn over and over, but this was a new day – this day the buccina's cry brought help, and in time. Today his call was made and answered, and before he knew it people were there, bewildered by the sound of the buccina, but they were there.

A man on top of the crags shouted what must have been words of encouragement and comfort down to the injured people, words the buccinator could not understand. A nearby woman spoke more quietly at a small pink box covered with glittery bits, twinkling like stars in the light of the low sun.

Within a few tens of minutes, an enormous flying demon approached from the east to fill the sky overhead.

Terrified by what his buccina had summoned, the soldier flattened himself against the wall; Rome's last remnant in the North and his only refuge. The beast hovered like a dragonfly, grown bloated and grotesque. Its bellow and flap chopped the air, all encompassing as it rebounded from every stone. He could not understand – why was no one else afraid? Many failed even to look up.

The monstrosity opened its maw, but instead of teeth and tongue, he saw yet more men. Disgorged on hugely long ropes, they were lowered down to the bottom of the cliff.

The injured people were drawn up swiftly and, completely defenceless, unable to even cry out, they were swallowed by the monster. The huge beast turned away, the wind beating down on the buccinator as he clung to his wall, leaving a strange kind of silence in its wake.

The crowd of watchers divided and divided further until only one remained.

Alone again...

Had he helped those people or damned them? No! Before grief could claim him once more, he took the buccina in his hands one last time and blew – this time her cry was a cry for victory. Help *had* come, the imperilled *had* been saved – he had to believe it, even if he did not understand it. However long he had endured or must endure still, he knew that this time he had called, had done all he could and it had made a difference. The buccinator could lay down his guilt this day. How he wished he could peel back those centuries of despair to tell his companions, his friends, that he was sorry; he was so sorry that he had failed them on this very hill of blood and screams, all those ages ago.

He looked down from his crag across the wide valley, as he had so many times. These moors, often so bleak, often so brutal, glowed radiant on *this* day, as the sun's late burn drew fresh colours from earth and sky. He had never seen it so beautiful.

His gaze followed the southern slope downwards.

Shock... His jaw dropped as he saw faces he recognised – laughing, cheering faces, calling to him.

Half running, half tumbling down the hill in disbelief, he virtually crashed into the waiting men. Like passing from a room to another room, all was as it had been, with back slapping and banter. He wondered how this could be when, slowly, the soldiers parted to reveal his father and mother. Covering the last few steps in long leaps, he clasped them in his arms. Through tears he squinted over their shoulders and then he saw her.

Out of the low sun she walked, luxuriant black hair swaying in the breeze; the girl who wasted away in grief, after the army tore away her young man, had gone ahead to wait for him all these centuries.

He pulled the horn from around his shoulders, kissed his mother's cheek and ran to her with the buccina, his bi-millennial companion, still gripped tightly in his left hand. He reached out and held them both with all of his strength. Finally, he realised that for centuries uncounted, these forbidding moors had been separated from the fields of Elysium only by the hair's breadth of his guilt.

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