

# Borderland

A Jericho AU

by Tanaqui

## 1. Frontier Posting

Tribune Tiberius Matius Buccio huddled deeper into his cloak, seeking shelter from the raw wind gusting across the gently rolling hills that surrounded the fort. Ahead of him, Centurion Longinus seemed indifferent to the weather. Buccio supposed that, eventually, he too would become accustomed to the notorious climate of Britain. Two weeks had so far proved insufficient. Not for the first time, he found himself wishing he was back in the high, dusty plains of Cappadocia in the East.

The fort, with its turf ramparts and wooden palisade, also seemed a poor exchange for the fine stone fort of his last posting. Even the huddle of dwellings and wine-shops that always gathered around any fort seemed drab and mean in comparison, with their thatched roofs and wattle-and-daub walls. Still, everything had seemed to be in good order when Buccio had inspected the fort with Longinus, from the rows of cavalry pickets and barracks to the granaries and latrines and the bath-house. And, like all the men Buccio had so far met, the sentry they now passed as they made late rounds gave challenge and answer smartly enough.

"They're good lads, the First Thracian," Longinus had told him the night before, while they shared a drink of wine in the commander's quarters that would soon be Buccio's. He sounded sorry to be leaving them, though Buccio knew he was being given a promotion, back into one of the regular legions.

"And what about the natives? The Legate briefed me when I passed through Londinium, but you know how these things are." Buccio gave a slight shrug. "Not much detail."

Longinus nodded: although he only carried the rank of cohort centurion and no doubt had received his fair share of inadequate briefings from more senior officers, including tribunes like Buccio, he seemed a welcoming soul. "They're friendly enough, I suppose. Didn't get mixed up in all that bad business three years back—."

He wrinkled his nose as he spoke. There was no need to elaborate on what the 'bad business' was: news had reached even the furthest corners of the empire about the revolt in Britain and how the tribes had slaughtered half the Ninth Legion, before the Fourteenth and Twentieth under Governor Suetonius had put them down. The province seemed quiet enough on the surface now, but Buccio and an additional cavalry wing had been sent to strengthen the vexillation at Corinium and make sure things stayed that way.

Buccio nodded to show he'd understood and Longinus went on, "There's a couple of local duns less than half a day's ride away. They haven't caused much trouble recently—apart from the damn cattle raids. You can make your own mind up who to believe, but they'll both swear blind they didn't start it and they're just rounding up what's theirs. Anyway, I'll take you over to both of them, introduce you to the chieftains, and let you see for yourself."

Buccio had met the first of the chieftains that morning: a tall fellow with pale blue eyes as hard as flints who styled himself Constantius—though Longinus told Buccio he had been

known by his own name of Cadan until a mere two years before, at which time he had apparently deemed it politically wise to become more Roman than the Romans.

They reached Constantius' dun by taking the Via Praetoria that led out through the main gate towards Venonae and then, at its end, to Lindum many miles away. The day was clear but cold and the low hills to either side rose in soft greens against a pale blue sky. The little troop—Buccio, Longinus and an escort of a tent party of eight auxiliaries—turned off the road after no more than a dozen miles, leaving the smooth, paved surface that had been laid less than twenty years before and taking a well-worn track of beaten earth, strengthened here and there with corduroys of logs, that quickly led to the dun.

Buccio had been surprised to be greeted by Constantius in the forecourt of the Chieftain's Hall, rather than beside the hearth inside, as he had been told was the custom of the tribes in Britain. Surprised too, to see that Constantius was clad in tunic and toga rather than the native dress worn by the other men gathered before the hall. Folding camp chairs were brought out for them to sit upon, and glass goblets. Constantius himself filled them with wine before raising a toast to the emperor, instead of calling on the woman of the house to bring out the Guest Cup. In fact, Buccio realised, he could see no women at all except for a wizened old slave who presented a dish of fine red Samianware filled with imported raisins and almonds.

*More Roman than the Romans, indeed!* Buccio thought, as they rode away an hour later. Perhaps it was the contrast with the dun itself, the usual huddle of reed-thatched huts and small garths set inside a ring of turf banks and thorn bushes, that had made the Roman welcome seem strange. Yet Buccio could not but help feeling as if he had witnessed a hunting dog performing a clever trick to please a foolish master, while it cast sly-eyed looks towards the deer-carcass it had been called off from moments before.

He recalled, too, the sullen expressions of the men who had stood around watching them while Constantius spoke his careful Latin and exchanged the necessary pleasantries with Longinus and Buccio. When the squeal of a horse from somewhere at the far side of the dun had made Buccio turn, wondering what the sound presaged, two of them had—instinctively it seemed—taken half a pace forward, arms akimbo, so that the fall of their cloaks blocked any view in that direction.

Edging his horse closer to Longinus, Buccio murmured low enough that the escort behind could not hear, "If I am not mistaken, I think Constantius would rather we did not trouble his store of wine often—nor his hunting runs."

Longinus grunted in agreement, his lips twitching wryly. "I think you are not mistaken. Nevertheless, he also takes care not to trouble our patrols. His quarrel is not with Rome."

Buccio cast a glance over his shoulder at where the dun had disappeared from view behind an outthrust arm of the hills. His eyes narrowed as he recalled the orders the Legate had given him in Londinium. Facing forward, he squared his shoulders and pulled himself up straighter. Silently, he promised himself that Constantius' quarrel would most assuredly be

with Rome if he troubled any man under Buccio's protection, whether part of the garrison or not.

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The bitter wind that had kept Buccio huddled in his cloak the night before had mercifully dropped the next day, replaced by a soft, warm mizzle rain that twisted his cloak into damp folds as they rode the four miles to the nearer dun.

They were still a mile away when they caught sight of two boys minding a herd of cattle in a marshy pasture to their right. Buccio saw them bend their heads together, before one of them took off over a shoulder of the hill behind, no doubt to carry news of the approaching party. Buccio realised Constantius must also have had word of their coming the previous day, though he had noticed no signs they were being observed until they were close to the dun. While a guard upon his hunting runs was a wise precaution for any chieftain, the stealth with which Constantius maintained his watch gave Buccio pause.

The troublesome thought was forgotten for the present as they rounded the shoulder of the hill and he saw the dun before him. While it was no less carefully sited for defence than Constantius' dun had been, it bore a more welcoming aspect. Broodmares, some with knock-kneed foals at their sides and others still with swollen bellies, grazed on the slopes below. Once they had passed within the ditch and bank, Buccio saw women sitting in doorways spinning or grinding corn, and he could hear the beat of a hammer on an anvil somewhere to the left.

A dark-haired man some years Buccio's junior came forward to greet them as they clattered to a halt in the paved space before the largest of the roundhouses. He was clad in a plain woollen shirt and chequered trousers, with his plaid cloak flung back over one shoulder. "Come you in and be welcome." He gestured towards the low, dark entrance to the hall as he spoke the words in clear but slightly accented Latin.

Buccio's mare stamped restlessly and tossed her head, and the man took a step forwards and gentled her neck, murmuring something in the local tongue that seemed to soothe her. Buccio couldn't catch the words and doubted he would have been able to make sense of them even if he had: though he had become fluent in the Cappadocian dialect in his time in the East, he had yet to pick up more than a few dozen words of the native British tongue.

The man tipped back his head, meeting Buccio's gaze as Buccio frowned down at him. Warmth and a little amusement flared in the dark brown eyes set under flyaway brows. "I was just telling our sister here—" The mare was nudging his shoulder, snorting contentedly, as he went on stroking her neck. "—that there is no need to be afeared. We are among friends here."

"So we are!" Longinus dropped from his horse and came to clasp the man's arm, a broad smile on his normally dour face. "Jago! Is your father within? I bring the new Commander to meet him."

"Sa, he is within. Come you inside." Jago, relinquishing the bridle of Buccio's horse to the auxiliary who had come forwards to take it as Buccio dismounted, turned and gave Buccio an appraising look for a moment, before he led them into the dim, smoky interior of the hall.

Buccio found all within much as he had expected from the amused warnings of fellow officers when, on his journey from the East, he had admitted the place of his next posting. As promised, the reek from the fire in the centre of the hall caught at his throat even as he crossed the threshold, and he swallowed down a cough. The place was also dim, though there was light enough from the leaping flames to show him an older, large-bodied man sitting on a low stool to one side of the fire. Another, younger man crouched at his side, the resemblance between them close enough that Buccio guessed they were near kin. They were bent over something in the older man's hands—a piece of horse harness, Buccio saw, as he turned it over and it caught the light—but they looked up as Longinus and Buccio followed Jago inside.

"My father—," Jago still spoke in Latin. "I have brought you Centurion Longinus and the new Commander who is to come after him."

"So." The older man laid aside the leatherwork. "Come you in beside the fire. Though the wind's bite is not so fierce today, this damp air is none so good for old bones." He, too, spoke Latin, though with less fluency than his son and a shape to it that suggested the little Buccio knew of the tongue of the tribes. Acknowledging the dip of the head that Longinus gave him in greeting, he turned his scrutiny to Buccio. "I am Jowan, and this is my son Ennor." He indicated the man at his side. "My older son, Jago, you have already met."

"And I bring you Tribune Tiberius Matius Buccio, who is to be Commander after me." Longinus waved Buccio forward.

Before Buccio could speak, a woman came forwards from the shadows on the other side of the fire. She carried a bronze cup in her hands, which she offered first to Buccio. "Drink, and be welcome."

Buccio saw, as she moved further into the light, that her copper braids were scarcely touched by frost, though she must be of an age with Jowan. Her eyes when she lifted them to smile at him, were the same shape and colour as Jago's and he guessed from that, and from her bringing him the Guest Cup, that she must be Jowan's wife.

Buccio carefully took the cup from her, recalling all he had learned of the customs of the tribes from a native-born duplicarius who had been part of the cavalry wing he had brought with him from Londinium. He was aware that Jowan and Jago and Ennor had their eyes upon him, and that this was a test of sorts. Returning the woman's smile, he did his best to repeat one of the few native phrases he had painstakingly learned. He drank and gave the cup back in to her hands.

Her mouth twitched briefly as she turned away to carry the cup to Longinus, and he suspected he'd mangled more than one word. But before he could speak again, Jowan laughed, a pleasant, low rumble, and said something in the native tongue that Buccio thought

included the word 'tribune' but which he could make neither head nor tails of otherwise. His confusion must have been evident on his face, because Jowan gave him a kindly smile and, speaking Latin again, said, "It seems the Tribune knows something of our customs and our speech."

Buccio gave a slight bow. "Only enough for courtesy's sake so far, Lord Jowan. But I hope to learn more in time."

The woman was now carrying the cup to her husband. Taking it from her, he drank and then said, looking at Buccio over the rim, "From Rome, that is a courtesy indeed." He softened the slight edge to the words with another smile. Buccio was sharply reminded that though Jowan and his people might be more truly welcoming than Constantius had been, and though they had traded long with Rome and learned its language, they were still a frontier people, brought under Rome's rule only when Jowan had been the age his sons now were.

Jago had taken the Guest Cup from his father, exchanging a look with him before he too drank and passed the cup on to his brother. Then he turned and offered Buccio a smile. "If the Tribune would learn, I would gladly teach. Perhaps the Tribune is fond of hunting?"

Jowan's wife had disappeared into the shadows but now returned with barleycakes sweetened with honey, and Jowan waved them towards the fire, to share the food and pass around the Guest Cup between them. Settling into his place, feeling his knees creak a little as he squatted, Buccio nodded. "I have hunted often among the rocks and the high plains of the East when duty spared me."

Again there was an amused look in Jago's eyes, and one corner of his mouth turned up in a crooked smile as he too folded himself up in his place. "We have no high plains here, but our game is good. I will take the Commander hunting when duty spares him. He has only to send word of the day and I will come to the fort with spears and ponies."

Buccio hesitated, recognising that here was a chance to build stronger bonds with the local Tribe, yet unsure whether he should make himself so beholden to them.

"He's a good guide," Longinus offered, around a mouthful of barleycake. "I've been out with him several times myself."

So it seemed it was already a matter of custom. Buccio returned Jago's smile. "I shall send word."

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## 2. A Good Hunting

A few weeks later, Buccio found himself following behind Jago as the two of them rode along a track which hugged the lower slopes of the line of hills that ran northwards from the fort. Jago was making good on his offer to take Buccio hunting.

Open woodland stretched out on either side of them: beech mostly, with here and there a glossy-leaved holly bush or a great-girthed oak. Under the trees, from whose twigs young green leaves were unfurling shyly, a shimmering carpet of nodding blue flowers stretched out on either side, their bells shaking noiselessly in the light breeze. The sky above mirrored the ground: a soft, high, blue. When the track widened or the trees thinned, Buccio lifted his face gratefully to warm it in the sun that had, after several grey weeks, at last made an appearance.

Tilting his head back down as the trees closed in again after one such brief glimpse of warmth, Buccio fixed his gaze thoughtfully on the back of the man in front of him.

He had met Jago several times since that first encounter in the dun: it seemed some business or other of the Tribe brought him to the fort nearly every week. Often, Buccio learned, he came to speak to the quartermaster or one of the other senior officers regarding supply contracts or the provision of horses. Once, as Buccio was returning to his office in the praetorium, he ran across Jago lounging outside the hospital, waiting for the senior surgeon to look at a young kinsman who had taken a cut on his arm that had festered and would not heal. The boy had, it seemed, been injured while breaking a horse. Buccio found himself passing a pleasant half hour discussing ground-training techniques with Jago, before the boy emerged from the hospital with his wound salved and bandaged. Jago had shepherded him away home, while Buccio had reluctantly continued on to face the paylists and duty rosters that awaited him in his office.

Another encounter had been less enjoyable for both of them: Jago had come to speak to him about the theft of some cattle by Constantius' people. Jago—clearly still visibly angry, despite his best efforts to speak quietly once he was shown into Buccio's presence—asserted Constantius' men had first threatened the herd boy with knives and then dealt him such a blow to the head before they drove off the cattle that it was likely his wits would never fully recover. When Buccio questioned how Jago could be so sure Constantius' people were responsible, when the boy could not provide reliable testimony of what had happened, Jago's eyes flashed for a moment. Then, taking a deep breath and reining in his fury, he explained he and his brother, Ennor, had made a foray onto Constantius' lands and found the cattle penned in a remote valley in the hills

"Why did you not simply drive them back?" Buccio wanted to know.

Jago's mouth twitched at that. "Because the Commander asked us to bring such matters to him, rather than take justice into our own hands."

"So I did." Buccio dipped his head in acknowledgment. It seemed Jago and his father had heeded his parting words when he had first met them, warning them that he would look

unfavourably on any continuation of the low-level lawlessness Longinus had contended with. "I will look into it." With another dip of the head, he indicated that the interview was over and bent back to the tablets in front of him.

"Tribune—." Raising his gaze again, Buccio saw Jago had taken a step closer and the anger was back in his expression. "If it were only the cattle taken, I would not have troubled you. But the boy—."

Buccio leaned back in his camp chair and, placing the tips of his fingers together, gave back look for look. "I have heard your story—" He ignored Jago's snort. "—and when I have asked Constantius for his tale, I will decide the truth of it. Until then, be satisfied that I will investigate with all my powers and that justice will be done. And until then, go you home and take care of the boy, and pray to your gods, as I will to mine, that they return him his wits."

Jago looked for a moment as if he would say more, before he gave a curt nod and strode out of Buccio's office without another word.

Constantius, of course, claimed the cattle had simply wandered onto his lands, and that they had merely been penning them until they could return them. He declared that the herd boy must surely have slipped and hit his head before the cattle strayed, and had invented this wild story of a raid to cover his own failure to take care of the beasts.

Buccio went himself with a detachment of auxiliaries to retrieve the cattle and drive them back to Jowan's dun. As he told Jowan and Jago, sitting once more by the fire in the Great Hall with the Guest Cup passing between them, he did not much believe Constantius, but there was little proof to be had one way or the other. The cattle were returned, and Constantius knew Buccio's eye was on him. Buccio would step up the patrols in the hills and, he was sure, there would be an end to such incidents. Jowan and Jago had seemed less than convinced, but had agreed to let the matter rest.

There had been no further trouble of that kind in the weeks since, enough that Buccio thought he might be able to step down the patrols he had been sending through the hills. Indeed, he might be forced to, for there was trouble brewing on another front: there had been more than one occasion when Constantius and his people had provided short measure or inferior goods on the contracts they had with the fort. When the quartermaster had sent his men to fetch the goods, with orders to make the selection from Constantius' barns and storehouses themselves, there had been angry words and almost an exchange of blows.

The officials sent to collect the taxes due that spring had also found Constantius' people less than cooperative, with one excuse after another given as to why the tax collectors must return in a week or a month. While there had been no open threats made, sometimes the officials had been faced with groups of sullen-faced young men loitering nearby, fingering the daggers in their belts. Reluctant as Buccio was to make a show of force—and risk provoking the fight he was keen to avoid—he felt it was fast coming time to send a detachment of auxiliaries with the officials to ensure Rome's demands were met.



All of it had reinforced the impression growing in Buccio's mind that the devotion to Rome and all things Roman that Constantius had displayed at their first meeting had been a mere veneer that concealed a deep resentment of Buccio and his men's presence.

Dismissing the troubles that awaited him on his return to the fort, Buccio followed Jago as they left the ponies in a hollow a bowshot from the track and headed up into the hills on foot, each carrying a brace of the light hunting spears Jago had brought with him. Yet though they found plenty of spoor, and here and there a tree with a ring of nibbled bark, they saw no sight of their prey all morning except for a fleeting glimpse of brown hide and a flash of white that was gone almost as soon as Buccio touched Jago's arm to draw his attention to it.

"I am sorry I have proved such a poor guide," Jago said, as he brought out a midday meal of wheaten biscuit and dried meat from the bag slung across his pony's withers.

"No matter." Buccio smiled as he took the food from him. "I am sure we shall have better luck after we have eaten."

He turned back to look at the view as he ate: when they had returned to the ponies, Jago had led them up a deep valley until they climbed above the woods and found themselves out in the open again. Here, on the crest of the hills, the wind bent the long grass sideways, and hawthorn and gorse bushes leaned before it like old women bent from carrying water. A wide valley lay spread out below, stretching towards another ridge of hills that rose several miles away. On the nearer side, a mile or so from the foot of the hills, the road north to Lindum ran arrow straight. The fort and Jago's dun lay somewhere to their right and behind them, where they sat.

Finishing up his food, Buccio nodded at the land below. "How far do your father's hunting runs stretch?"

Jago gave him a sharp look, as if guessing at the purpose behind the question, before he relaxed again. Lifting an arm, he pointed to a longer, wooded spur a little to the north. "See where the land rises? So far and no further. From there down to the river." He swept his arm around towards where the river must run, marked by a line of rushes and shrubs, with only the occasional glimmer of water reflecting the noon sun.

"And beyond belongs to Constantius?"

Jago's mouth twisted into a crooked smile. "As you well know."

"As I well know," Buccio agreed, not minding the slight jibe. "Still, it is good to see it with my own eyes and not just in the reports of my decurions."

"That is so." Jago dipped his head in acknowledgment, before he quickly brought his gaze back up to meet Buccio's. "It is good for a man to know his own limits."

From the way he spoke, Buccio knew they were no longer discussing hunting runs. "I suppose it is," he said carefully, wondering exactly what they *were* speaking of now

Jago went on looking at him steadily, his expression serious. "And there are things which are one man's business and no other man's. And other things which are the Tribe's business and no other tribe's. And—" He paused and again his mouth twisted into a crooked smile, though this time there was a hint of bitterness in it.

Buccio, understanding, finished the thought. "And there are things which are the business of the Tribes and no business of Rome's?"

Jago nodded. "Yes." He held Buccio's gaze a moment longer before he turned away and, gathering up the pouch that had held the food, got to his feet. "We will try the next valley over. We may have more luck there."

They made their kill an hour later—a fine roe deer—but Buccio was still thinking about that conversation when they arrived back at the fort, the gralloched carcass slung across the rump of Jago's pony. Rome was largely content to let the tribes govern their own affairs, as long as their customs did not trouble others or run counter to Rome's laws. Rome was, of course, the ultimate authority: Buccio had found himself playing magistrate several times to settle disputes between his troops and the tribesmen living and working in the ragged settlement outside the fort's gates.

Watching Jago as he helped two of the auxiliaries unload the deer from his mount, Buccio wondered just where Jago drew the line between the business of the Tribes and the business of Rome, and what would happen if either of them sought to cross it.

With the deer being hauled away to provide a little variety for the officers' mess, Jago turned to Buccio. "A good hunting?" he asked, with a smile and a dip of the head.

"A good hunting," Buccio agreed, handing back the spears he still carried. And not just because they had made their kill: Jago had proved a pleasant companion on the hunting trail, silent for the most part, but ready enough when he did speak to share his knowledge of a country that was still strange to Buccio or, as they had made their weary way home, explain the customs of his Tribe and teach Buccio a little more of the native tongue. Heading for the bath-house a few minutes later to soak away the aches of the day, Buccio found himself looking forwards to the next time he could spare a day from his duties and go hunting again.

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### 3. "A strange way of doing things"

Jago took Buccio hunting again a few weeks later. This time, they went in search of waterfowl among the reeds and marshy ground that edged the river to the west of the fort. Buccio learned to handle the small fowling bows and arrows fletched with red-dyed feathers that Jago brought with him; he had to force himself to suppress an uncharacteristic whoop when, after several failed attempts, he made his first kill.

It was late afternoon, and the two of them were wet and muddy by the time they returned to the fort, a half dozen birds dangling from their saddles. It had been raining on and off all day, and there had been much splashing around at the water's edge to retrieve the birds they had shot or, in Buccio's case, the spent arrows when he missed.

The fort wore a gloomy aspect under the still louring clouds as they approached. Perhaps it was just the weather that made it seem so—or perhaps it was the thought crowding into Buccio's mind that, once he had visited the bath-house, he would have to return to the necessary tedium of drawing up duty rosters and determining punishments for the men who had earned them and deciding on the repairs that needed to be made to number three barracks. And after that, he would face stilted talk in the officers' mess in place of the easy conversation that had ebbed and flowed with Jago during the day as the demands of hunting allowed.

"Come, join me in the bath-house," Buccio blurted out. He had not meant to say it: the words took him as much by surprise as they evidently did Jago, to judge from his raised eyebrows; but once they were out, Buccio knew he had been right to say them.

Jago gave him a long, considering look, before saying slowly, the corner of his mouth curving up in that wry smile of his, "I should like that."

They left the ponies and their gear at the gate and, having sent for clean tunics to be brought from Buccio's quarters, made their way to the bath-house set outside the fort walls. Jago checked at the entrance. Glancing round, Buccio saw him looking uncertainly about the changing room. It was still somewhat empty, just a tent party of auxiliaries climbing back into their gear, with gear for maybe another tent party hanging from the pegs or piled on the benches beneath them.

"This is the first time you have visited our bath-house?" Buccio asked, his voice echoing a little: the auxiliaries who were there before them had fallen silent when they caught sight of the newcomers.

"It is." Jago took a step further inside and sideways, out of the way of two of the auxiliaries who, gazes turned down, headed outside with a muttered "Sir," and a nod in Buccio's direction.

Jago turned back to Buccio. "Centurion Longinus did not honour me with an invitation." The crooked smile was back, but Jago's eyes were warm with appreciation.

"No?" Buccio gestured for Jago to follow him further into the room as the remainder of the soldiers hurried out. He pointed to the space reserved for the officers. "So, here is a place to hang your clothes, and Marius here will bring you a towel." He nodded to one of the auxiliaries currently on bath-house duty.

A short while later, stripped of their outer gear and wrapped in towels, Buccio and Jago made their way through the cold room, where several soldiers were taking a plunge in the pool, and on into the warm room. Here, the rest of the soldiers were lounging and chatting; two were throwing dice; others were listening to one telling a funny story or a joke, to judge by a roar of laughter that rose up as Buccio and Jago entered; the bath-house attendants were busy scraping oil from two more.

Buccio led them to the bench that ran along the opposite wall from where the soldiers sat, not wishing to disturb the men. Jago leaned forwards, resting his arms on his knees, still looking around him, the blue swirls of the tattoos on his back and shoulders seeming to shift on his skin as he settled himself.

Buccio leaned back and closed his eyes, letting the warmth of the room sink into him. He heard the soldiers opposite quickly grow quiet and then leave in the direction of the cold room. The room felt silent, apart from the occasional quiet rattle as the bath-house attendants went about the business of tidying and cleaning in readiness for their next patrons.

"Do they always do that?" Jago's words were quiet, barely above a murmur.

"Do what?" Buccio cocked open an eye.

Jago was looking after the departing soldiers. "Leave when you come in?"

"I suppose they do." Buccio hadn't much thought about it. He gave a slight shrug. "I shouldn't imagine they much want to be around officers when they're off duty."

Jago had turned his gaze on Buccio, his expression thoughtful. "No, I suppose not," he said finally. He sounded almost sad.

Buccio straightened, feeling a little defensive for his men. "I suppose that seems odd to you. There are no such distinctions among the chieftain's hearth companions?"

Jago laughed, scrubbing a hand over his hair. "Oh, the greybeards can curse out the young whippersnappers if they think they crow too loudly." His expression sobered and he gave Buccio another long, melancholy look before he said with a shrug, "But we grew up together and... the Tribe is the Tribe. We are all cousins of one kind or another." Abruptly, he sat up and stretched, flexing his shoulders. "So when do we *bathe*? I think I would be cleaner by now if I had simply stood outside in the rain all this time." He grinned at Buccio, clearly enjoying teasing him.

Buccio returned the grin, finding in turn that he was rather enjoying being teased. It had been a long while, he realised, since there had been anyone at all to tease him. Not since he'd left his home in Corduba and, following the career path expected of him as an equestrian, joined the army as prefect of an auxiliary cohort. That was nearly fifteen years ago now and he'd barely recognised his old friends on the few occasions he'd managed to get home on leave between postings.

He went on grinning at Jago. "But you would have been cold and stiff and sore if you had stood in the rain," he pointed out, countering Jago's objection. "And if it is water you seek, you must wait a while. First, we must go to the hot room, where we may sweat out the dirt we have gathered to us. Then we will return here and the attendants will bring oil and scrape away the dirt. Only after that shall we take our plunge in the pool." He gestured back towards the cold room.

Jago shook his head. "It seems a strange way of doing things. But lead on."

Later, as Jago and Buccio lay on the massage tables while the attendants worked the remaining knots out their muscles, and anointed them with Buccio's personal stock of oil before scraping them clean, Jago opened one eye and murmured sleepily, "I think I could become used to this."

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#### 4. "Our word against theirs"

Buccio stared in disbelief at the breathless scout, before he pushed to his feet. "Where?" He reached for his helmet as he snapped out the question.

"The far side of Boundary Hill, sir. There's a valley...."

Buccio nodded. He didn't know the valley, but he knew the hill the scout had named. The ridge was the one Jago had pointed out on their first hunting trip together, the rise of land marking the divide between his father's lands and those controlled by Constantius. It was no great surprise to learn that the brawl the scout was reporting had taken place there. It was rather more of a surprise—and an unpleasant one—that there had been a brawl at all; things had seemed to have been quiet between Jowan's people and Constantius' for several weeks now.

"Casualties?" Buccio indicated with a jerk of his head that the scout should follow him as he made for the door.

"One dead, three injured, one of them badly, sir." The scout gave his report briskly enough, but Buccio caught the anxious look he threw his commanding officer. "Don't know how many of theirs. We hadn't a chance to count before the decurion sent me back."

Buccio grimaced as they clattered out of the praesidium and across the hot, dusty parade ground. It was always a possibility, of course: the risk his men took every time they left the fort. It was part of the job. He didn't like it any better for that. "Did they say *why*?"

"Something about stolen horses, sir."

"Gods!" Buccio beat his fist against his hilt of his sword. He wasn't sure he'd ever get his point through to Constantius, except by making the consequences so severe no leader in his right mind would consider provoking such a reaction—a step he was reluctant to take—but he'd thought he'd made some progress with Jowan and Jago. Would these people never learn?

Less than two hours later, he was riding up a sheltered valley that opened north-east. A full four cavalry units rode behind him: as he'd made his way to the main gate, he'd decided the delay in gathering the troops would be worth the message such numbers would send.

With a wave of the hand, Buccio sent two tent parties to relieve the auxiliaries guarding the carefully separated groups of tribesmen. The native warriors were squatting on either side of a small stream that chattered down the slope from a spring in the north-west corner. Surveying the two clusters of men, Buccio quickly caught sight of Jago and Ennor in one group and Constantius in the other. Jago had lifted his head as Buccio and his troops approached, his expression taking on a rueful cast as he met Buccio's gaze.

"Have Jago and Constantius brought to me." Buccio barked the order at the decurion next to him before dismounting and striding across the rough turf to where the dead had been laid to

one side. He counted five bodies, not including the auxiliary, who had been laid a few feet away, his red cloak covering his stiff form.

The wounded were being tended further up the slope, next to the outfall of the spring. The two lightly injured auxiliaries, one with his arm in a sling and the other with a bandage tied around his upper arm, sat either side of their more grievously injured comrade, lying flat on his back. Three more auxiliaries stood between huddles of injured tribesmen, alert to the possibility they might start the brawl again despite their wounds.

Buccio stirred the foot of one of the dead tribesmen with the toe of his sandal, before lifting his gaze and fixing it on the figure of the dead auxiliary. Would there be no end to this foolishness?

A faint cough behind him indicated the decurion had returned with the two ringleaders. Turning, Buccio saw the decurion had assigned a pair of soldiers to each man as escort. A wise precaution: Jago was glaring angrily at Constantius, muscles tensed as if struggling to restrain himself from flinging himself at the other man. Constantius held himself as if ready to react, a slight smirk on his face.

"I'd like an explanation of what happened here today. From both of you." Buccio inclined his head in Constantius' direction. "You first."

Constantius turned his head to look at Buccio. "We made a trade for horses." He jerked his head in the direction of a half dozen beasts that had been herded together at the foot of the hill. Buccio heard Jago snort, presumably disputing the transaction had taken place. He ignored the sound, concentrating on Constantius as he continued speaking. "At a steading near here. We were driving the mares home when these men set on us without warning. Three of my people were killed before we were aware of the danger. We were defending ourselves when the Red Crests arrived and pulled them off us. We did nothing wrong here."

Constantius lifted his chin, his icy stare challenging Buccio to dispute his account of events. *Too much*, Buccio decided, matching Constantius' look for look. He was reminded again of the way Constantius had first greeted him; there was none of the would-be Roman in Constantius' air now.

Pressing his lips together, Buccio turned towards Jago. "Your story?" He raised his eyebrows.

"My story?" Jago choked out a half-laugh. "They attacked one of our farms. Fired the house-  
place when all were asleep within. Drove off the horses. One of the farm hands raised the alarm. We followed to reclaim what is ours." He gave Buccio a quick look that suggested he was not much expecting to be believed.

Buccio knew whom he trusted to be telling the truth of the two of them—unless he had badly misjudged Jago after all. But the reason for the battle was not the only matter to be settled. "Why did you not come to me with this?" he demanded. "As well you knew you should."

Jago shrugged. "If we had done so, our horses would have been long gone and well hidden, and it would have been but our word against theirs."

"So, instead, we have more dead. My own man among them." Buccio cast a pointed look in the direction of the dead Roman soldier.

Jago bowed his head briefly. "For that, Tribune, I am sorry."

A glance at Constantius showed no such remorse in his expression, but rather a hint of satisfaction.

"Hmm." Buccio thought a moment longer, before giving his orders. "Decurion, have all the horses rounded up and taken to the fort."

"What—?" Jago took a step forward.

Buccio gave a warning shake of the head. "For the present, they are forfeit. Until I have had time to consider this matter further. And the dispute between your peoples is over. Do I make myself clear?"

Buccio looked between the two men. Constantius was still smirking, but he gave a shrug and a dip of the head to say he was happy to accept Buccio's ruling— as well he might be if the horses had never been his in the first place. Jago, on the other hand, looked anything but happy; his eyes glittered dangerously.

"This isn't over," he said, his tone even and cold with anger.

"Oh, yes, it is." Buccio reached out and caught Jago's arm, towing him away from Constantius. He pointed to where the other two units he had brought with him were ranged at the mouth of the valley. "In case you misread my message, I have enough men and more to fill these hills, so that neither you nor Constantius nor your peoples may take a step without me knowing of it." He turned Jago to face him and gave him an earnest look. "Go home. Be with your families. Care for your wounded and bury your dead. And I will help guard your peoples so there can be peace."

Jago looked as he were going to speak but then decided against it. Instead, he gave Buccio a quick nod.

Buccio tightened his grip on Jago's arm and stepped closer, speaking only for Jago's ears now. "But cross me again," he warned, "take the law into your own hands again, and you will feel how heavy Rome's hand can be, and learn that there is nothing which is not the business of Rome."



## 5. Midsummer Feast

Buccio watched sparks fly up into the deepening dusk from a nearby bonfire. Children were running around playing tag, apparently inexhaustible even after a day of games and feasting, while their mothers tended to bronze cooking pots and exchanged news from afar. Some of the men were still bargaining over goods—finely crafted axes, lengths of cloth, fine red Samian bowls that must have been imported from Gaul—but the bulk of the day's trading was done: the sheep and cattle and long-legged colts that had been trotted out to be examined and haggled over and bid on had been driven away and safely penned by their new owners. Now the wide strip of land lying between two shallow ditches that ran side by side towards the setting sun was given over to revelry.

Some of the men had gathered around a ring marked with birch branches where a few of their number, stripped to the waist and hair bound back, tested their strength in wrestling matches, each cheered on by their own friends. In another corner, the cries were for fighting cocks. Beyond them, young men and women were weaving complex patterns, joining hands and parting, in dances that would, for some, lead in time to another, older dance, bringing new blood into their duns.

All in all, Buccio decided, the scene was not so different from the rowdy festival of Fors Fortuna that was being celebrated that same evening in more civilized parts of the Empire further south. He was certainly developing the same sort of headache: a little mazed from the day's heat and the smoke of the fires and too much time spent going from one group to another to speak to this chieftain and that. Or maybe it was the effect of the sour barley brew in the cups that had been thrust into his hand each time he stopped; for courtesy's sake, he had needed to accept and drink from each, though he had been careful to take only a sip—but there had been so many cups....

Rubbing the back of his hand across his forehead, trying to persuade away his headache, he wondered if he could safely leave the gathering, or whether that would be a diplomatic error of some kind. Centurion Longinus had not mentioned that the Commander would be invited to the Midsummer gathering when he had handed over command, many months ago now. His decurions—none native-born, alas—had also known nothing of any customs beyond those Buccio could have guessed at himself. Surely meeting with all the different leaders, as he had done, was enough?

Yet he certainly did not wish to create offence—not when he had finally, it seemed, convinced Constantius to keep the peace with his neighbours. It had been done at the cost of carrying out near constant patrols of the area where Constantius' hunting runs marched with Jowan's, but peace there was. Buccio had also found a way to discreetly return the horses he had confiscated after the fight to Jowan and his people, sure that they were the rightful owners. Remembering Jago's quick, grateful smile of understanding, Buccio realised that he had one friend here at the gathering he could turn to for advice without appearing weak or foolish: had Jago not shown, in more than the matter of hunting, that he was willing to hold to his promise to teach Buccio the customs of his people, if Buccio was willing to learn?

With the decurion who had accompanied him as he processed around the gathering ground still at his heels, Buccio wove through the crowds. Yet when he reached the place Jago and his father had made theirs for the day, he found only Jowan and Ennor.

"Tribune." Jowan's eyes twinkled. "Come to sample our mead now the day has turned a little chillier?" He waved forwards one of the boys, who quickly brought beakers for Buccio and the decurion.

Buccio accepted his with a smile, though he was careful only to wet his lips for form's sake: he had sampled the honeyed drink back at the fort soon after his arrival and had learned it was as potent as it was sweet. "In truth, I was in search of Jago," he admitted.

Jowan gave him a cautious look. "He has... business to attend to for a while."

"Business?" Buccio raised his eyebrows, wondering at the cryptic response.

Jowan jerked his head towards the far end of the gathering ground, where a single large round-house had been erected, the space around it kept clear of children and campfires and livestock, though elsewhere was close-crowded. "There are... ceremonies..."

"Ah." Buccio dipped his head in apology. "Forgive me. I did not mean to pry." He should have guessed as much, for such gatherings were the domain of gods as well as men, and he had noticed the round-house earlier, and the way it was set apart, and the way men came and went from time to time.

"No harm done. And my son should return soon, if you still wish to speak with him." Jowan downed the remaining contents of his own cup and handed it back to the boy who had served Buccio. "And now I have business of my own." This time he indicated another part of the gathering ground, where crude latrines had been set up just beyond the ditch.

Buccio watched him for a while, weaving his way in stately fashion through the throng, greeting acquaintances here and there. Then he bent his gaze towards the round-house, wondering when Jago would return. When he looked back at Jowan, he saw to his surprise that the older man had been joined by the unmistakable figure of Constantius.

The two of them spoke for a moment. Even at this distance, Buccio could see Jowan's shoulders stiffen, while Constantius' hands clenched into fists at his sides. Then Jowan raised a hand dismissively and stalked away. Constantius turned to look after him, his displeasure at the outcome of the conversation writ large in his stance. Buccio wondered briefly if he should follow and speak with Constantius, to discover what had been said. Yet his own words to Jago came back to him: *there are things which are the business of the Tribes and no business of Rome's*. Belike he would only make things worse if he intervened. Even as he decided to leave well alone, Constantius disappeared back into the crowd.

Swinging away, he found Ennor watching him, a slightly uncertain expression on his face, though he broke into a smile when he saw that he was being observed in turn. Buccio had spent less time with the younger of Jowan's sons, but they had spoken on occasion. Now

Ennor raised his cup to Buccio and asked, speaking slowly and carefully in the native tongue, "Has the Tribune enjoyed the gathering?" Perhaps Buccio looked startled at being addressed so, for Ennor gave a slight shrug. "My brother tells me you have been learning our speech."

Buccio raised his own cup in reply and returned the smile. "I have," he answered, searching for the words. "Both the enjoying and the learning." He suspected he had made more than one mistake, but his words must have been clear enough, for Ennor looked pleased. The exchange reminded Buccio that he should thank Jago for the lessons: though most conversations during the day had switched rapidly to Latin, he had found himself treated more warmly once he had made the attempt to use the native speech. Taking a deep breath and mustering his balky tongue, he asked in return, "Has it been a good trading for you?"

Ennor nodded. "Sa. It has been a good trading." He smiled to himself and said something else in which Buccio only caught one word in three. Catching Buccio's confusion, he switched back to Latin. "The fame of our horses grows. There was a trader of the Coritani, from Lindum, who came especially to see our foals."

"They are indeed fine," Buccio agreed. "Even the Arab horses of the eastern deserts would not outmatch them, I think."

He and Ennor went on talking about horses for a while longer, Buccio casting the occasional glance towards the round-house, looking for Jago's return, until Ennor abruptly broke off what he had been saying, looking past Buccio to where some commotion was starting up near the edge of the gathering ground, on the inner side of the ditch. Voices were being raised in outrage, and Buccio thought he caught the word "Dead!"

Exchanging a glance with Ennor, he put down his beaker and the two of them hurried across to where a crowd was growing in the shadow of a tent improvised from lashed poles and gaily striped native blankets. The crowd stepped back as Buccio approached, revealing the figure of a man lying on the ground.

For a moment, it looked as though the man had simply fallen asleep. Then Buccio saw a dark stain spreading across the man's tunic where a knife must have been thrust under his ribs—and that it was Jowan.

Ennor pushed forward, falling to his knees beside the body. "Father!" He reached out his hands but stopped short of touching Jowan, as if afraid.

Thinking rapidly, Buccio turned to the decurion, who was still close behind him. "Tell the escort to look out for anyone trying to leave the gathering and to detain them. Have one of the men ready to carry a message to the fort. Then come back here. I shall need you to—."

He broke off as the crowd parted, making way for Jago. "I was on my way back and I heard..." His gaze went past Buccio to where his brother knelt next to Jowan. Even in the uncertain light of the torches, Buccio saw him turn pale. Without another word, he brushed past Buccio and knelt opposite Ennor.

Buccio was half-aware that the decurion, understanding the need for haste, had hurried away to carry out the first part of his orders. Most of his attention was fixed on Jago, as he slowly swept his gaze over his father's body, taking in not only the neat, precise wound but also the brooch that still clasped his cloak and the arm ring and torc he still wore. At last, Jago lifted his head and met Buccio's gaze.

"Constantius. Constantius did this."

"We have no proof of that," Buccio pointed out, very gently, though it had been his first suspicion also. This was certainly no robbery gone wrong.

"Who else?" Jago's eyes flashed. "Who else would bring weapons to the gathering ground? Who else wished my father ill?"

"None that I know of." Buccio caught Jago's gaze and held it. "And yet I do not know all of this matter there is to be known. And nor do you. Let us seek out the truth—."

Jago let out a snort. "The truth is that Constantius must pay for what he has done."

"*If* he has done it." Buccio squatted down on his haunches next to Jago and put a hand on his arm. "Do not let your grief and anger provoke you into foolishness, Jago." He spoke softly. "For the sake of your father, and the friendship he offered me, do not act rashly. Give me a little time...."

On the other side of Jowan's body, Ennor made a movement, as if he wished to speak but at a shake of the head from Jago, he sank back on his heels again. Jago was silent for a long moment, his gazed fixed on Buccio's face, as if trying to read what was in his mind.

Then, at last, he drew in a deep, ragged breath and nodded. "You shall have your time. A little time. So that Rome may prove to her satisfaction what my people already know in their hearts is true."

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## 6. Investigations

The next few hours were as busy as any Buccio had ever known. When the decurion—Paulinus—returned, Buccio set him to searching the immediate area for the knife that had ended Jowan's life. As Buccio had expected, there was no trace of the weapon. Buccio himself questioned those who had crowded around the murder scene, but it seemed most had only gathered once the body had been discovered, and no one present recalled seeing anything amiss before the alarm was raised.

By that time, Jago and Ennor and other men of their dun had made a rough bier and were bearing the body away towards the round house at the far end of the gathering ground. The news had run through the place and the merriment that had been in full swing only minutes before had been silenced. Each dun drew its own together, the men speaking in low murmurs and the women keeping their children close as they watched the sad procession pass. Now and then, one of the men would leave his own people and cross the trampled grass to speak for a while with those from another dun, sober faced.

Once the small procession reached the round house and the bier had been set down before the doorposts, Buccio set off along the gathering ground with Paulinus at his heels to where Constantius' people had made their place for the day. He was still many feet away when he saw that several of the men who were normally in Constantius' company were absent. Of Constantius himself there was no sign.

Coming to a halt before Constantius' people, Buccio demanded, "Where is your chieftain? Where is Constantius? I wish to speak with him."

The men stared back at him, sullen-eyed and silent, while the women turned their gazes down and the children gaped at him, wide-eyed. One man, standing a little in front of the others, apparently the leader of those who were left, gave a small shrug and half spread his hands, as if he had not understood the Latin words.

Swallowing down his rising anger, aware he was being watched from all quarters of the gathering ground, Buccio repeated the question, this time speaking in the native tongue. "Where is Constantius?"

The man sniffed derisively. "Gone." He gestured roughly in the direction of Constantius' dun, many miles away. "Home. An hour, two hours, maybe."

Buccio knew that for a lie. He had seen Constantius speaking with Jowan—arguing with him—not half an hour before. Yet he knew he would get no better answer tonight.

"Then I shall follow and speak with him." He held the man's gaze for a moment, before he turned and strode away. Time to find his escort and see if they had news of a party fleeing the gathering ground.

He was already several paces away when he realised that, with anger lending him a little more fluency than usual, he had in his haste mistakenly used the word for *hunt* not *follow*. Perhaps, he thought to himself with bitter amusement, it had not been a mistake after all.

Walking back down the gathering ground, Paulinus still at his shoulder, he was aware of many eyes on him. He was not much surprised when, only half way to the entrance at the south-eastern end, a small knot of men detached themselves from the crowd and approached him. He recognised two of them: chieftains whose hunting runs ran to the south of the fort. He slowed to a halt as they blocked his way.

"What do you do now, Tribune?" the foremost of them asked.

"I go to speak to my men." Buccio gestured towards where he had left the rest of his escort. "To see if there is anything they can tell me that will bring me closer to the truth of what has happened here."

The other chieftain stepped up. "The Law has been broken. No man may bring weapons to the gathering ground, and he that does brings shame upon his dun."

Buccio nodded, acknowledging the point. He and Paulinus had given their own swords into the safekeeping of the duplicarius in charge of his escort before they entered. Yet he was not so sure the Law had been violated. "Even an eating-knife may be a weapon in an unfriendly hand," he pointed out quietly. The wound under Jowan's breast had been small, scarce two-finger's width. It would not have needed a sword or a dagger to make it. "But this deed shall not go unpunished. Rome does not look kindly upon murder, within your gathering ground or without."

He made as if to move on—all that needed to be said had been said, and there was work to be done—but the two chieftains stood where they were, still blocking his path. The first spoke again. "The Tribe also does not look kindly upon murder, within the gathering ground or without. Yet within.... A dun that would give shelter to the man who would do such a thing must answer for it—with fire and blade."

Buccio blinked, suddenly realizing that he had misunderstood the request to give up his own sword. He had thought the ban on weapons was simply to prevent a quarrel escalating into something worse, but he saw now that it was more: it was a symbol that the gathering ground was a place of truce, where old disputes, and current ones, were to be laid aside for a few hours. The man who had killed Jowan had struck a blow not just at another man but at the heart of the Tribe, at the trust that let the duns come together, summer and winter, to trade and talk and dance. Without that trust, he would have had a dozen men like Constantius on his hands, stirring up trouble with their neighbours over imagined slights and old feuds.

He nodded. "It shall answer."

The chieftains bowed their heads in acknowledgement, seemingly satisfied, and let him pass on. Yet as Buccio resumed his course towards the entrance, he found himself wondering if all

in Constantius' dun should be punished for the ill-temper and rashness of their chief. Did the women who tended the hearths and the babes who suckled at their breasts deserve to have the thatch fired over their heads?

He pushed aside the question as he reached the entrance to the gathering ground and looked around for his escort. For now, his task was to find the proof that would allow him to lay the blame for Jowan's death where he was already sure it belonged: at Constantius' feet.

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When Buccio reached his escort, he found that they had seen nothing of Constantius' departure—but they did have confirmation that he *had* left.

"Sorry, sir," the duplicarius said, with a rueful shrug. "There's been comings and goings all day, so we didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. But after Decurion Paulinus brought your message, I sent the lads round to ask a few questions. A pair of boys keeping an eye on things out here said they saw some of Constantius' lot leading a score or more ponies away. Half an hour ago, maybe."

Buccio knew Constantius and his men would be long gone, either halfway back to their dun or somewhere else in the wild countryside where he would likely never find them. Certainly not by stumbling about in the dark with less than a dozen men with him. The matter must wait until the next day. Then he could ride out to the dun with a proper show of strength, enough to force the truth out of Constantius if he would not provide it willingly.

Ordering the escort to make ready to leave—all but two, who would stay behind to bring word of any trouble that might blow up later—Buccio once more passed through the entrance to the gathering ground. He owed Jago and Ennor the courtesy of informing them of what he had discovered and what his intentions were.

The gathering had quieted still further. Half-asleep children lolled against their yawning mothers, while the men had drawn close to their campfires, keeping a wary-eyed watch. Several of Jowan's people were still gathered around his body, Jago and Ennor among them. When Jago saw Buccio approaching, he touched his brother's arm, drawing Ennor with him so that the three of them met a short way from Jowan's corpse.

"Constantius has fled." Buccio hitched at the shoulder straps of his breastplate, suddenly feeling tired under the weight of his armour. "Gone before your father's murder was discovered, I think, which speaks to his guilt. Tomorrow, I shall seek him out at his dun and see if he will yield the truth. "

"Why not tonight?" Ennor gestured impatiently towards the entrance to the gathering ground, as if urging Buccio to lead the way, right now.

"Because I do not have enough men with me to persuade him of the wisdom of answering my questions truthfully, and it will take time to gather them." Buccio kept the rebuke gentle, understanding the young man's need for action.

"There are men enough here." This time, Ennor swept his arm more widely, encompassing the whole of the gathering ground.

"But not *my* men." Buccio hardened his tone, catching Ennor's eye and holding it until the other looked away, conceding the point with a grudging lift of the shoulder.

Turning to Jago, Buccio saw the same frustration on his face. "And after?" Jago lifted his eyebrows.

"And after, if you will, come you to the fort in the evening and I will give you an account of it."

"And if my people do not wish to wait for such an accounting, but would demand their own?" Jago tilted up his chin, his expression challenging.

"Then I shall be gathering my troops to have an accounting from *you*." The two of them glared at each other for a long moment, before Buccio reached out and grasped Jago's arm. "I know this matter touches you near." He spoke softly but urgently. "I know that the blood of your father cries out for vengeance. But, for now, Constantius is my quarry, not yours. And you have my word: tomorrow, I will have the truth of it. Until then, I put my trust in you to hold the peace. No threats nor vengeance. Do you understand?"

Jago was silent for a moment, and then Buccio felt some of the anger flow out of him. He gave a sharp nod. "I understand."

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## 7. Feathers Tipped With Yellow

As Buccio rode towards Constantius' dun the following morning, he wished he had been able to snatch a little more sleep before the coming confrontation. His day had not ended when he returned to the fort the previous evening: instead of the calm challenge of the gate guards and the quiet clink of armour from the watch patrolling the ramparts, he had found the place seething like an angry anthill. The area behind the gate had been turned from night to day by guttering torches, which were casting their light on two units of cavalry preparing to head out.

A few quick words with his second-in-command brought the unwelcome news that a patrol had run into a band of natives to the west of the main road. The tribesmen had refused to stop when challenged, and had cut the patrol almost to pieces when the auxiliaries had tried to make them comply. Reinforcements were being sent to recover the dead and to begin the search for the tribesmen.

Pausing only long enough to change to a fresh mount, Buccio had swung into place at the head of the column. He was sure the band must be Constantius and his men, fleeing from the gathering ground. When they reached the site of the skirmish, the scene confirmed it: Buccio recognised one of Constantius' hearth companions among the tumbled and bloodied bodies of his own soldiers.

Buccio had quietly beaten his fist into the palm of his hand as he watched the corpses of the four dead auxiliaries being loaded onto pack ponies. Constantius had crossed one line earlier in the evening, with Jowan's murder, whether he had done the deed himself or simply condoned the actions of the man who had actually wielded the blade by shielding him from justice. Now he had crossed another line, one that touched Buccio more nearly.

There had been casualties before, of course, as the patrols had broken up running fights between men of different duns or turned back groups intent on raiding. For the most part, the tribesmen had surrendered or fled when confronted: with the memory of the recent uprising in the East—and the way it had been put down—still fresh in their minds, they knew better than to provoke Rome. Yet Constantius had disregarded all that, just as he had disregarded the customs of his own people, back at the gathering ground.

Riding back from the site of the slaughter, Buccio had decided that he had tried to play peacemaker for long enough. If the local tribes would not respect Rome's authority and live quietly, then it was time to start taking a spear or two from among the sheaves.

Now, in the cool of the summer morning, he headed towards Constantius' dun with a full eight units—a quarter of his vexillation—at his back. He was determined to leave Constantius' people, and Constantius himself, in no doubt of what might happen if there was further trouble.

Nearing the turning from the main road, Buccio drew in a deep breath, preparing himself for the coming confrontation—and then sniffed again, as he scented smoke. Not the ever-present

reek of wood-and-dung fires that seemed to hang over the whole countryside when the wind was light, but a sharper, stronger smell.

As they rounded the shoulder of the hill and the dun came into view, the reason for the smell quickly became apparent. At least three or four huts had been burned to heaps of blackened timbers from which thin trails of smoke still rose. Buccio could see patches of scorched thatch on perhaps half a dozen more. To the right of the dun, a group of boys of ten or eleven were driving a handful of cattle towards a pen where men laboured to repair the smashed hurdles that had once formed its walls.

Buccio left most of his cavalry on the slope below the dun, taking only Decurion Paulinus and a small escort with him as he approached a handful of men who waited at the entrance to the dun, watching his approach with distrustful eyes.

Buccio swept his gaze over the group, not finding the face he sought. "I come seeking Constantius, your chief."

An older man with a bald pate fringed by greying sandy hair, who stood a little ahead of the others, gestured to Buccio to follow him inside the dun. "I will take you to him." Slipping from his horse, Buccio made his way after him, Decurion Paulinus a pace behind.

The man led him towards the forecourt before the Chieftain's Hall. Buccio guessed what he was going to see a moment before they reached the place: a row of bodies, Constantius' in the centre.

Buccio swallowed hard: some of the bodies belonged to women and children, and several of them were badly burned. But he could see at once that this was not the work of some ill-chance spark catching upon dry thatch: three or four of the men, Constantius among them, had been taken by an arrow in the neck or chest.

"What happened here?" Buccio turned to the man—Priscus was the name he used, Buccio remembered now; he had been one of the men attending Constantius when Buccio had first visited the dun.

"We were attacked." Priscus' eyes flashed dangerously. "Those thieving cowards to the south."

"Jowan's people?" Buccio raised his eyebrows. While he could not quite believe Constantius would have staged a scene such as this as a final act of provocation—he would have surely arranged his own survival—he could well believe that his people would be happy to blame Jowan's dun, regardless of who the real culprit might be. Besides, Jago had given his word there would be no retaliation. Buccio gave Priscus a long, hard look. "You are sure of that?"

"Aye." Priscus turned his head and made as if to spit. "We saw his son, Ennor, with our own eyes in the light of the flames. And you can see for yourself the arrows they left behind."

Buccio took a step closer to the bodies, looking more closely at the shafts. All were fletched with goose feathers that had been tipped with yellow, tying them to the hunter who owned them. The shape of the point would also mark out the smith who had forged them. He did not yet know which man those arrows belonged to, but it would be an easy enough matter to discover if they were tied to Ennor or any other among Jowan's kin. And if they were.... Buccio grimaced. He had known Constantius for a liar, but he had *trusted* Jago, counted him a friend. The thought that Jago might have lied to him made the breath catch in Buccio's throat for a moment.

"Get me one of those arrows," Buccio instructed Paulinus when he could speak again, his tone sharp. He cocked an eyebrow in Priscus' direction. "If is permitted?"

"The Tribune wishes to look for the truth?" Priscus shrugged a shoulder. "Then he should take what he needs."

As the decurion began on his grisly task, Buccio turned his attention fully on Priscus. It had not escaped his attention that the other man had a fresh bruise on his forehead, or that he carried one arm a little stiffly, as if it had been hurt. Some of the other men, too, bore fresh cuts and bruises. Perhaps they had been gained during the assault on the dun—and perhaps not.

"There are two other matters in which I seek the truth." Buccio swept his gaze over the small crowd of men who had gathered in the forecourt, addressing his remarks as much to them as to Priscus. "The murder of Jowan at the gathering ground yestereve, and the killing of four of my men in an attack between here and the gathering ground an hour later." He turned back to Priscus, waiting for an answer.

Priscus gave him a carefully blank look in return. "I am sorry for the Tribune's losses. But I know nothing of these matters. We have been busy with our own troubles." He gestured around at the burned buildings.

Buccio gave him a level look in return. "I see that may be so." He wondered if the rest of the tribe would consider Constantius' people had now been sufficiently punished for Jowan's murder. He could hope, at least, that with Constantius and many of his hearth companions dead, he could expect less trouble from this dun in the coming months. But the deaths of his own men had still not been sufficiently accounted for. "Yet I think at least some of your people have knowledge of the attack on my patrol. We found one of your men, Lucius I believe he called himself, among the slain."

Priscus mouth twisted for a moment, as if he had bitten into a sour apple, and he looked as if he wished to deny it, but apparently could find no excuse that he though Buccio would accept, for he remained silent.

"Sir?" Paulinus was on his feet again, showing him the arrow he had retrieved.

"Thank you, decurion." Buccio took a quick glance around again to conform how many of the huts had been burned beyond repair, before he turned back to Priscus. "My men who

survived the attack also tell me Lucius was not alone. That he had a dozen companions or more with him who did not stand aside from the slaughter. I think another eight huts should suffice—for now.”

Not giving Priscus a chance to reply, he turned on his heel and marched out of the dun. There was another new made chieftain who must also give an accounting for his people.

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Buccio left three quarters of his troops behind to see to the burning of the eight huts, taking the remainder with him to Jowan’s dun. He was not expecting much trouble there, for all that Jago and Ennor had broken their word, and he was confident a double unit should be enough to handle it. Indeed, when he rode up towards the dun, he found it even quieter than Constantius’ place had been. The fields and pens were empty, and silence hung over the huts as he rode in through the unguarded gates, though he felt many eyes watching from within dim doorways.

He was met before the whale-backed Chieftain’s Hall by a tall, fair-haired woman who carried herself like a queen. He remembered seeing her on the women’s side of the hall, busy with some task or other, during the two or three visits he had made previously, though they had not spoken. She held out the Guest Cup as he dismounted. “Greetings, Tribune. Drink and be welcome.” There was a coolness to her tone that belied her words.

Buccio took the cup and drank and gave it back to her. “Good fortune on the house, and the woman of the house.” Glancing around and seeing only more women, he looked back at her. “I am seeking Jago. Is he within?”

He thought he saw a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes, before she said, just as coolly, “My lord is from home today.”

With a start, Buccio realised this must be Jago’s wife, and that she must have found herself, all without warning, mistress of the Chieftain’s Hall. He wondered where Jowan’s wife was, and hoped she had some comfort in her grief. But all he said was, “I see.” He glanced over the woman’s shoulder, into the gloom of the hall. “And Ennor, your lord’s brother? Is he from home also?”

“He is.” Jago’s wife tipped her chin up a little, clearly defying him to question the truth of her statement.

“And when will your lord and his brother return.”

She gave a slight shrug. “I do not know. My lord did not tell me.”

“I see,” Buccio said again, feeling somewhat at a loss as to how to proceed. He could hardly camp outside the dun until Jago returned—and Buccio had a suspicion that would not be any time soon. He certainly did not expect Jago to present himself at the fort that evening, as arranged, after all that had happened. Just as the hasty departure of Constantius and his

men from the gathering ground had spoken of their likely involvement in his murder, so did the strangely convenient absence of Jago, Ennor and most of the men of the dun speak to their role in the attack on Constantius and his people.

*Why, Jago?* he found himself asking silently. *Why did you break faith with me?*

Still, this need not be an entirely wasted journey. He dipped his head in the direction of the hall. "Since I cannot ask it of your lord, I must ask it of you. I would see your lord's hunting arrows. Also those of your lord's brother."

Again, there was that flicker of uncertainty in her face, and her gaze shifted over his shoulder to where the two units waited patiently behind him. She must know that he did not need to make this as a request and that there was nothing she or the other women could do to stop his troops ransacking the dun if he ordered it, though he hoped it would not come to that. After a moment, she nodded. "As you wish." Gesturing to one of the other women to follow—Ennor's wife, Buccio guessed—she disappeared into the hall.

The two women returned a few moments later, each carrying a handful of arrows. The feathers on the bundle Jago's wife bore were a dark red, but the ones Ennor's wife carried were yellow-tipped.

Buccio stepped forwards and took one. "Decurion Paulinus?" He held out his other hand.

Paulinus stepped forwards and handed the arrow he had taken from Constantius' body to Buccio. Buccio compared the two: the fletchings were the same, while the point of the arrow in his right hand might have been the twin of the one in his left.

Without a word, he gave the arrow he had taken from Ennor's wife back to her. She held herself bravely, but he could see the fear for her husband in her face. Returning the other arrow to Paulinus, he once more turned towards Jago's wife.

"Tell your lord that I shall expect to see him at the fort this evening, as was our agreement. Tell him to bring his brother with him. And if not this evening, then by sundown tomorrow and no later."

She bent her head briefly in acknowledgment. "When my lord returns, I shall tell him."

Buccio swung away and mounted his horse. Gathering the reins, he looked down at her where she stood, tall and proud, afraid and yet unafraid. Had it been so with the wild queen to the east who had butchered half a legion, Buccio wondered. Pray that this woman and her lord were woven of wiser cloth. "Tell him, also," he said, his voice quiet but with not an ounce of softness in it, "that if he does not come, I shall seek him out, and I shall not rest until I find him."

## 8. Like a Defeat and not a Victory

Buccio paced restlessly around the narrow confines of his office. Playlists and duty rosters lay scattered across his desk, but he had no patience for them. His ears were cocked for the sound of patrols coming in at the main gate; for his second-in-command's footsteps on the stairs, bringing his report; for the sound of other footsteps, however unwilling.

Two days earlier, at around the same time, he had stood on the ramparts above the Sinister Gate, straining his eyes along the road while the sun sank behind a shoulder of the hills, hoping, still hoping—.

He had gone on standing there even after it had grown dark enough that it was impossible to make out anything more than a bowshot from the walls. Maybe he would have gone on standing there all night if the decurion in charge of the first watch had not given a discreet cough. "Sir? Will you be making last rounds?"

Buccio had nodded, even as he swept his gaze one last time along the darkening road. Then he had turned away.

Jago had not come.

Buccio had spent the night trying to puzzle out the reason. For all that he and Jago had reached out to each other across the distance that lay between their two worlds, and for all Jago had tried to explain the ways of the Tribes, it seemed to Buccio that he still did not understand how they thought. They were like children or slaves, he decided in the end: always fearing the rod of a cruel master and not understanding that a kind master would temper correction and punishment with mercy and understanding. And, like a fearful slave, Jago and his people had run and hidden. Yet had he not shown Jago that Rome could be a kind master? That he himself could be a good friend to the Tribe, to Jago....

Tossing and turning on the narrow cot in his sleeping cell, Buccio could not quite push away the hurt he felt that Jago had not trusted him, the way he had trusted Jago when he made his promise at the gathering ground.

The next morning, Buccio went again to Jago's dun and watched unsmiling as his men searched the houses and barns, the granaries and the workshops, the cattle pens and the horse runs. They found none but women and children, and a few old men too frail to walk far. The villagers had stood aside, silent and uncomplaining, as his soldiers had pulled apart bedding, rummaged through chests and overturned storage pots, scattering their meagre possessions across the beaten-earth floors and outside on the paved forecourts. Buccio had never really expected to find the men he sought, but he hoped that perhaps the women—already picking up pieces of broken dish or shaking the dirt from striped blankets tossed in the dirt as the auxiliaries withdrew—might talk some sense into their menfolk.

After he returned to the fort, he sent out patrols into the hills, to search the valleys and woods where he and Jago had hunted together. He had already set men to guard the road north and south, and the road that led to the river-crossing at Glevum, and left his best

scouts to watch the dun, to see who came and went and to follow them. But the patrols returned at dusk, footsore and weary, with nothing to report: they had scarcely seen a squirrel or a thrush stirring, much less the men they sought. The scouts likewise had no good tidings—though Buccio was far from certain that meant none had left or entered the dun, despite the watch kept upon it.

The patrols had gone out again this morning, their numbers doubled, this time beating up from south to north along the line of the hills. Yet there were so many hollows and thickets and tangled woodlands where many men might lie hid while a whole Roman legion passed—and these men had hunted these hills since they were boys. Buccio was not much surprised when, at last, his second clattered into view and said wearily, “Nothing to report, sir, I’m afraid.”

Buccio turned and leaned on the windowsill, tilting his head so that he could see the sweep of the hills, dark against the lighter sky in which the stars were finally beginning to prick out. “Then tomorrow we shall send another message.”

It gave him no pleasure to send that message, sitting astride his horse as he watched his soldiers fire the thatch of a half dozen houses, taking care to keep the fire from spreading further while the reed and wattle-and-daub crumbled to ash.

When the task was done, he turned to Jago’s wife, standing before her people outside the dun, where his men had herded them before they began their work. She lifted her gaze to meet his, not bothering to conceal the hatred behind her eyes as he spoke to her. “Send word to your lord that I will return, and burn the rest and salt the fields, if he and his brother do not come to the fort by tomorrow nightfall.” Wattle-and-daub huts could be easily rebuilt and salted fields would bear again in three years, but it would go hard with them until then. Surely Jago would see the sense in yielding up his brother for the sake of all his people.

Buccio kept his troops beating the hills throughout the afternoon, pushing further into the clumps of gorse and thickets of hawthorn, where a man might lie hid under the tangled branches. All they got for their pains by nightfall were scratched arms and blistered feet. Buccio knew his men were starting to mutter that maybe the Tribune had become sun-touched at the midsummer gathering. Yet did they not understand that his orders—Rome’s orders—could not be defied without consequences?

He was standing outside the praetorium the next morning, discussing the allocation of the patrols for the day’s search, when a runner from the guard at the Sinister Gate hurried up and gave a hasty salute. “Sir. A man approaches. One of the natives. Carrying a green branch.”

“An ambassador?” Buccio raised his eyes inquiringly in his second’s direction. When he nodded, Buccio turned back to the guard. “Bring him to me here.”

It was a few minutes before the gate swung open to allow the newcomer to enter, but even from halfway across the fort, it took but a moment for Buccio to recognise him.

Jago.

He seemed to be alone; the gates swung closed behind him without admitting any other. Watching him approach slowly, a guard of soldiers at his shoulder and back, Buccio wondered where Ennor and the rest of the men were still cowering.

When Jago was within a dozen paces, Buccio took a step forward. "This is a start. But my orders were for you and your brother. Where is Ennor?"

Jago's step faltered for an instant, before he came on, stopping perhaps three paces away. He lifted the green branch a little, as if to draw attention to it. "This is my fault. No one else's. I am the chieftain of my people—."

"You were the chieftain." Buccio interrupted sharply. "By Rome's favour."

Jago took half a step back, clearly startled. Then he took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. "As the Tribune wishes." He dipped his head slightly before raising his gaze and fixing it on Buccio's face again. "But I still speak for my people, as their ambassador." Again, he made a slight gesture with the green branch, reminding Buccio he carried it and considered himself under its protection, before he went on, "And for their sakes, I surrender myself to you. Punish me for bringing Constantius to justice by our Law and not yours, if you will, but let them go in peace."

Buccio stared back at him, feeling all of a sudden as if someone had smote him in the centre of his bronzed chestplate. Why must Jago make this so hard? Why could he not let the blame fall where it should, on the man who had fired the shaft that had killed Constantius? "Where is your brother?" he managed to grind out.

Jago hesitated, though he did not drop his eyes, before he shook his head slightly. "I am the one at fault. Accept my surrender—."

"I accept your surrender." Buccio nodded to the soldiers on either side of Jago and they stepped forwards and caught him by the arms. "But your people shall not go in peace while your brother hides like a coward behind his women and children. And you shall not go free until I have him in my power." He nodded to soldiers. "Take him to the cells."

"No!" The green branch fell from Jago's hand and was trampled under foot as he twisted in the grip of the soldiers, attempting to pull free as they began to march him away. "Tribune Buccio, listen to me—."

With a sharp shake of the head, Buccio turned away and strode back towards the entrance to the praetorium. He had Jago. Ennor would surely follow soon.

So why, he wondered, as he mounted the stairs to his office, did this moment feel like a defeat and not a victory?



## 9. Breaking Point

The air inside the cell was musty as Buccio stepped inside, smelling of old straw and past prisoners. He tried to not to breathe too deeply in the hot air, baked by the afternoon soon beating down outside. Jago had been stripped of his shirt and his hands bound behind his back; the tattooed patterns on his chest and arms were barely visible in the gloom.

He lifted his head as Buccio entered, letting out a faint snort when he saw who his visitor was. "What do you want now? You have me."

Buccio folded his arms. "The truth would be a start."

Jago gave him a wary look. After a moment, he said carefully. "I've told you. I'm responsible. For everything."

Now it was Buccio's turn to sniff derisively. What Jago said might be strictly accurate—as chieftain, he was answerable for the actions of his people—but they both knew that wasn't what Buccio had meant.

"Maybe you are," Buccio conceded. "But I know that it was your brother's arrows that killed Constantius. That it was your brother who was seen at Constantius' dun, not you. I am quite sure they would not have neglected to tell me if you had been there also."

Jago was silent again, clearly thinking hard as he kept his gaze fixed on Buccio. At last, he said, "I gave the order."

Buccio shook his head. "I think not. I think if you had done so, you would also have given the order to use unmarked arrows, to stay out of sight, to make sure that none could prove you had broken your promise to me." Buccio was quite sure that, even in the heat of the moment, Jago would have given thought to the consequences of his actions. Indeed, he had done so when he had promised to wait until Buccio had looked into the matter. Ennor on the other hand.... "Your brother was too angry, perhaps, to think of such things, or to care overmuch for *your* promise," he pointed out.

Jago shifted, struggling to his knees. "They killed my father," he reminded Buccio, his voice harsh with grief. "At the midsummer gathering."

Buccio nodded. "I know," he said softly.

"And that was the end of a long line of troubles." Jago turned his head away, grimacing. "They deserved to be punished."

"Perhaps they did." Buccio took a pace forwards and squatted on his haunches, so his face was level with Jago's. "But not by you or your brother. We may be on the frontiers of the Empire but we are not beyond them, nor beyond the laws of Rome and the Law of your Tribe. It was not any one man's place to take justice into his own hands in this matter." Jago had turned to look at Buccio again. His eyes were dark and Buccio could not read his

expression, but he seemed to be at least willing to listen. Buccio reached out and grasped his shoulder gently. "Tell me where I can find Ennor and you have my word that you will go free and your people will face no further punishment."

Jago looked back at him, his gaze searching Buccio's face as if trying to decide whether Buccio spoke the truth. Buccio gave him a small nod of encouragement: *trust me*. At that, Jago wrenched his shoulder from under Buccio's hand. "I won't give him up. If that's what you want, you'll find yourself waiting until Rome has crumbled to dust and the stars have fallen from the sky."

Buccio rocked back on his heels, shocked at the venom in Jago's voice. For the second time that day, he found it hard to draw breath. Jago went on glaring at him.

At last, Buccio drew in a deep breath and pushed to his feet. "I do not think I shall need to wait so long," he said coldly, looking down at Jago. He could feel the anger rising inside him—why must Jago be such a stubborn fool?—but he kept it in check, for now.

He took a pace back, still holding Jago's gaze. "Everybody breaks, in time. I shall give you a day to think about it. After that, you will tell me where your brother is, or there will be more houses burned, your fields salted, your cattle slaughtered...."

There was no change in Jago's expression, but Buccio thought he saw something flicker deep in his eyes. Yes, a day to reflect on his people's fate and Jago would see the wisdom of handing over one man to save the rest of his people.

Turning to the door, Buccio gave a nod to the guard as he passed. "No food or water until I give the command," he ordered. Yes, a little time and Jago would surely come to his senses.

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"They said *what?*" Buccio stared at the auxiliary in disbelief.

"That you'd, uh, broken a truce, sir," the decurion repeated, shuffling his feet. His *bare* feet, Buccio reminded himself. "And that you could have the gear, supplies, wagons and horses back—less the cost of repairs to their houses—when you released their chieftain."

Buccio again swept his gaze over the decurion, who was wearing nothing but his undertunic. Mail, helmet, sword, shield, even his boots were gone. Behind him, the rest of his troop stood in an equal state of undress. They had trailed in to the fort in the late morning, footsore and weary, to report that a group of natives had jumped the sentries in the dead of night while they were camped on the road up from Calleva, overpowered the rest of the men, who were asleep, stripped them of their gear, and melted away, taking with them the entire supply train the troops had been escorting.

Dismissing the men, Buccio made his way slowly back into the praetorium. The auxiliaries would need to be disciplined, of course, for allowing themselves to be caught off guard. Buccio wondered briefly what fate would await *him* when he made his own report to

legionary headquarters. The slaughter of the patrol by Constantius and his men had been awkward enough, especially after he had assured his superiors just a few weeks earlier that the area was now calm, but such incidents did happen from time to time when the natives took it into their heads to make trouble. This, though, was quite another matter.

Ordering the duty officer to send messengers to the temporary camps guarding the roads to be on the alert for further attacks, Buccio took himself to his office. He found himself a tablet and stylus, but he had not got beyond the salutation to the legate before he sat back in his chair, fingers steepled, pondering how he should proceed.

He could carry out his threat to destroy the rest of Jago's dun, of course, but he suspected that such a step alone would not end the attacks. Without his brother's restraining hand, Ennor would surely grow more wild and foolish. No, Buccio must persuade Jago to renounce his brother's actions publicly. He had been willing to give up his own freedom, perhaps his own life, to secure the future of his people. He would not wish to see his brother throw that away, over this foolish notion—Buccio clenched his jaw at the thought—that Buccio had *broken truce* by arresting him when he had come bearing an ambassador's green branch, that *Buccio* was the one who was at fault here.

Buccio beat his fists gently on the table. It was *Jago* who had broken faith first. Jago who had let his brother take revenge on Constantius, despite his agreement with Buccio to leave the matter alone. Whatever status Jago might have claimed as an ambassador was surely made void by that, and Jago must make his brother see the truth of it.

Satisfied he had determined the right course of action, Buccio lost no time in heading for the cells. This time, when he stepped inside, the small space seemed even closer than before, and Jago merely gave him a brief glance before wearily turning his head away.

"Listen to me!" At the sharply spoken words, Jago looked up again. "Your brother and his companions are putting the lives of all your people, and their homes, in danger. I want you to tell them to stop."

Jago moved his mouth as if to speak, but only a hoarse croak came out. Buccio recalled that he had ordered him to be kept without food and drink. He turned and called through the open cell door, "Guard! Water!"

A waterskin was brought and Jago drank. Licking his lips, he tried again. "What—what would you have me say?"

"That Rome cannot and will not tolerate such hostile acts." Buccio spoke slowly and carefully, measuring out his words and choosing to ignore the occasional snort from Jago as he went on, "That it is they who have violated the peace with these attacks, and not Rome that has broken truce by refusing to treat with lawbreakers who would shelter their wrongdoing behind an ambassador's green branch. That you reject what they have done, and would have them put an end to it. Perhaps, then, I can ensure their punishment is not so harsh."

Jago gave him a wry look. "You will return me to my people to tell them this?"

Buccio shook his head. "No. You will announce it before the praetorium. That should suffice." He was well aware that no one could so much as sneeze in the fort without the natives hearing of it: news of the previous day's events on the parade ground had clearly reached Ennor somehow—and speedily.

"And you would have me say that it was my people broke truce? That is we who have turned from the Law?" Jago spoke slowly, as if testing out the words.

"I would." Buccio squatted down in front of Jago, capturing his gaze and holding it. "Help me bring peace, Jago, for your people and mine," he urged.

Jago returned his look, his eyes dark and unreadable. Then he dipped his head and spat on the ground between Buccio's feet. "It is not we who have turned from the Law."

Buccio remained crouched, frozen with surprise and anger, looking at the gobbet of spittle on the bare earth for a long moment. Then he pushed back to his feet. "So be it. Your people will discover what it means to turn from the Law—the Law of Rome."

Jago was shaking his head. "The Tribe will not allow such a thing to happen."

Buccio shrugged. "Then the Tribe will learn how heavy Rome's hand can be."

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## 10. The Business of the Tribes

For the next three days, Buccio's patrols hunted for Ennor and his men—and Ennor and his men began to hunt them back. A feathered shaft would fly out from the shadows among the trees; a stone would be cast from further up the hillside. Yet when the patrols pushed into the woods, or panted up the slopes, they would find nothing, barely even a bent twig or bruised leaf to show someone had been there. Few of the wounds were serious, but Buccio saw the constant fear of ambush was starting to weigh on the men.

After the first day, they began to meet many parties from the other duns making their way about the countryside. The tribesmen put up no resistance to being challenged or having their gear searched, though they were sullen and gave only terse answers when the patrols demanded their business. Such visits between duns were hardly unknown, but Buccio wondered at the number of them, now of all times. On the evening of the third day, he sent some of his decurions out into the wine shops in the settlement clustered outside the fort.

"Ennor has put out the Call to the Tribe," Decurion Paulinus reported back, late that night. "He is saying we have broken truce by disregarding the green branch their chieftain carried, denied them the Law, insulted the Tribe. That they must take back the land we have stolen and thrust us out and bring Jago back to his rightful place."

Buccio drew in a sharp breath. "And what does the Tribe say?"

"They've haven't decided yet. Or, at least, that's what they're saying in the settlement." Paulinus shrugged. "The word is that they are inclined to agree with Ennor about the insults, but there is still much debate over how they should respond."

"Gods!" Buccio smacked a fist into the palm of the other hand. "They'll bring the whole legion down on them." The legate had already offered to send reinforcements and suggested Buccio simply raze the duns, one by one, until the Tribe gave up Ennor in self-defence. Buccio had been less sure it would work—now he was convinced it would not have helped—and had managed to convince the legate that, for the present, it wasn't necessary. He had wanted to avoid provoking a worse confrontation. Yet it seemed he had failed. And if the Tribe was planning an attack, he would have to call for aid.

He had no doubt that Rome would prevail—but the cost would be high. Not just in lives of Roman soldiers but in the young men of the Tribe cut down in the prime of life, in the women and children left without shelter when their houses were burned, in the pens empty of herds of cattle and horses that would take half a lifetime to rebuild. They had defied Rome, and he should not care what fate they met—and yet he found he cared. And there might still be a way to prevent the Tribe from destroying itself.

Dismissing Decurion Paulinus, Buccio made his way to the cell block. After the first day, when Buccio had denied him food, Jago had been given water and fed a little broth each day. He still looked sick and haggard in the flickering light of the torch Buccio carried when he stepped inside the cell.

"What do you want now?" Jago's voice was rough, the words forced out past cracked lips.

"To try and help you save your people." Ignoring Jago's disbelieving snort, Buccio set the torch in a bracket and squatted down in front of him. "Your brother has called on the Tribe to join him and rise up and drive us out. Rome cannot—will not allow that to happen. The legion will send another vexillation, and they will be destroyed. Help me to help you save them."

Jago, his arms still tied behind his back, had struggled into a sitting position as Buccio spoke. "How?"

"Speak to them. Tell them you do not want this. Tell them all Rome wants is the men responsible for Constantius' death. If they give me that, then all this will be ended."

"And if I will not?" Jago's gaze was fixed on Buccio's face.

"Then perhaps your execution on the parade ground will make them see sense." Buccio's mouth twisted at the bitter words. He did not wish Jago's death. By all the gods, he did not wish for that at all. Yet he had no choice. "Once you are dead, they will have no cause to fight for."

Jago went on looking at Buccio, clearly pondering his words. Then he laughed harshly. "Once I am dead, they will have all the cause they need. If you would strike the spark that will set the land aflame, then you could find no better way than with my execution." He struggled to get his legs underneath him, so he could lean forwards and bring his face closer to Buccio's. "Do you not understand what I told you many months ago? That there are things that are the business of the Tribes and no business of Rome? My father's death at the gathering ground, my brother's justice for his murder—Rome has no part in these things."

"And the men of my patrol who died?" Buccio asked, his voice dangerously quiet, remembering the bloodied bodies and the stench of death.

Jago's gaze slid away. "That is your business, Rome's business. I do not deny that." He looked back up at Buccio. "Nor would the Tribe deny it: Constantius' men broke the Peace between Rome and the Tribe. And in such a matter, we would have given Rome the satisfaction she craves—if you had not broken faith with us."

"I break faith?" Buccio glared at Jago, feeling again the same sharp pain he had felt when he had confirmed Ennor's hand in Constantius' death. "*You promised me. I trusted you.*"

Jago gave a slight shake of his head. "I did not break my promise. I—" His voice hitched for a moment, as if he was choking back a bitter laugh. "—I did not make sure enough my brother did not break *my* promise, that is true enough."

With a weary sigh, he slumped back against the wall, tipping his head back and closing his eyes. Buccio stayed where he was, looking at him, suddenly seeing the pattern of the days since midsummer with fresh eyes.

He had been thinking that Jago had given him his promise as the leader of his people and that he had accepted it as the leader of his own, as Rome's administrator. And that had been the way of it, on the surface of things. Yet, Buccio saw with a start, he had also thought of the promise as being of another kind: as between shield-brethren who had hunted together and eaten together and shared stories around the hearth fire while the Guest Cup passed from hand to hand.

Was that why he had been so angry when he had discovered Constantius dead? So unwilling to listen when Jago had come with the green branch in his hand to make good his people's debt? That was a part of it, Buccio saw, but not all. He had been angry, too, that he had been robbed of his own chance to deliver justice to Constantius, both for his patrol and for Jowan, whom he had also counted a friend. And anger had fed anger, just as the wind will drive a surging tide higher and higher until it overtops a sea wall and rushes on to cover all the fields beyond with bitter saltwater.

Yet Jago, at least, walking the hard, narrow path between his people's Law and Rome's demands, had not broken faith.

Rubbing his temples with his fingers, Buccio quietly confessed, "I was wrong. About everything."

Jago opened his eyes and squinted at Buccio. "Perhaps not everything," he said just as quietly, only a little mockery in his tone.

"If you had come to me when you discovered what your brother had done, explained...."

Buccio knew he was trying to persuade himself, as much as Jago, that he did not bear all the blame himself. Yet he knew the fault was his alone, and he was not much surprised when Jago said gently, "You would not have listened. Not then. I thought that if you had a day or two for your anger to cool...."

Buccio nodded, understanding now why Jago and his hearth companions had taken themselves out of his reach—until it became clear his temper would not cool with time. And now that it was cooled, it was perhaps too late to mend the damage he had done.

"How do I make this right?" Buccio shifted so he was kneeling, his hands resting on his knees. "I have roused the Tribe, and they are right to be roused, for I have been a fool."

"You wish for peace?" Jago raised his eyebrows, apparently not quite believing Buccio's change of heart.

"I do. Though I do not see the way of it. Not after all that has been said and done." Buccio shook his head, remembering the burned villages and the manner of Jago's arrest. Remembering, too, the theft of the supply wagons and the harrying of the patrols. If Jago's people would not easily forgive what Rome had done to them, neither would Rome easily forgive the flouting of its authority.

Jago straightened, pulling himself more upright. "Perhaps there is a way." When Buccio looked up, hope springing up in him, he quirked his mouth in wry smile. "Do you still trust me?"

"Yes!" Buccio did not hesitate to answer. Though he was not sure why Jago should still trust him. He supposed, whether he trusted Buccio or not, he did not want to see more harm come to his people if peace could be had with honor.

"Sa. That is good to hear." Jago gave him a brief smile, before his expression turned more serious. "First, you must accept that my father's murder and my brother's actions are no business of Rome's. They are the business of the Tribe, and the Tribe is done with them."

Buccio nodded. "What else?"

"The killing of your patrol is Rome's business. If the Tribe gives up the men responsible, or those who remain, at least—say a life for a life—will that satisfy Rome?"

Again, Buccio nodded. He could not bring Constantius himself to justice, but he could mete out punishment to those who had aided him. If Jago could deliver the men, it would even send a message that the Tribe would not permit such actions against Rome.

Again, Jago's mouth quirked. "Perhaps your commanders could be persuaded also that these same men were responsible for all the troubles since midsummer."

Buccio raised his eyebrows. "And that your brother was blameless in all of this?"

Jago gave a slight shrug. "If you would have peace, I think it would be politic to believe it so."

"Hmm." Buccio pressed his lips together for a moment. "If the Tribe delivers up also my supply train and aught else that was taken, it would help me make the argument."

"Your supply train?" Now it was Jago's turn to press his lips together, clearly trying not to laugh. "I see my brother has been busy. But that I think is possible also. Would all this satisfy Rome?"

Buccio nodded. "If there is peace."

"So." Jago leaned forwards a little, wriggling his shoulders as if to ease them. "The negotiations are concluded, and the ambassador thanks the Tribune for his hospitality, and will take his leave and carry the Tribune's terms to his people."

It took a moment for Buccio to understand. "You want me to let you go?"

"If you want peace." Again, Jago shrugged. "If the Tribe is as angry as you say, then even I may not be able to persuade them to relinquish the fight. But you will not persuade them otherwise." Again, he quirked an eyebrow. "Do you not trust me? I give you my word...."



His gaze sought Buccio's and held it. The two men looked at each other for a long moment, all that lay between them, past and present, hanging in the air. Perhaps Jago would not be able to calm the Tribe, after the way Buccio had stirred them up, but—.

Buccio dipped his head. "I trust you."

oOo

## 11. Leavetaking

The day was sultry, the heat cloying even though it was only mid-morning, as Buccio rode out through the Sinister Gate. He rubbed the back of his hand across his forehead, wiping away the beads of sweat that had formed there in the short time since he had left the praetorium. It was hard to believe this was the same country in which he'd shivered against the biting wind and driving rain just a few months ago. A glance over his shoulder showed the small escort accompanying him were suffering just as much in the heat.

Turning his face forwards again, letting his gaze wander over the familiar lift of the hills ahead, he found his mind going back to the letter he had left on his desk back in the praetorium. It had arrived the previous day. Though he had read it a half dozen times, he had not grown to like its contents much better than when he had first broken the seal.

*To Tribune Tiberius Matius Buccio, from Septimius Cornelius Rufinius, Legate, greetings. Our thanks for the prisoners you have sent us and our commendation on the suppression of the unrest in your locality. We—.*

Buccio shakes his head at the memory. He did not feel he deserved his legate's congratulations. That the crisis was over was scarcely his doing. No: it had been Jago who had calmed the growing anger of the Tribe, and Jago who had persuaded his brother to end the attacks on the Buccio's men. Or, at least, Buccio assumed Jago had been responsible for the change in temper following his release.

What Buccio did know was that there had been no more clashes between his men and the Tribe after Jago had walked out of the fort eight days previously. He, for his own part, had disbanded the encampments on the roads and returned his patrols to their normal patterns. The native population had, in turn, gone back to their own duns and busied themselves again with the usual summer tasks of haying and harvesting and horsebreaking.

The only notable event in all that time had happened two days after Jago had left. A message had come up from the settlement that a number of men had been left tied up in a street in front of one of the wine shops, alongside the still-loaded wagons that had formed Buccio's captured supply train. "Some time in the middle of the night," claimed the wine-shop owner. "Didn't hear a thing myself. A little deaf, you know." Buccio wasn't entirely sure he believed the man, but he didn't bother to question him too closely. It was the business of the Tribe exactly how they got there, and the business of the Tribe whom they sent. What mattered to Buccio was that the prisoners included Priscus and several others who had been Constantius' hearth companions. Though the handful of men might not encompass all those who had killed the patrol at Midsummer, it was enough for Buccio.

He had kept them in the cell block for a further two days, while he made certain the peace would hold, before forwarding them on to legionary headquarters, along with his report. It would, he had decided, be prudent to hold their execution elsewhere.

The legate's letter confirmed they had been dealt with—and also contained other news that Buccio hoped would not disturb the delicate and still uneasy balance that had been forged in

the past few days. Though, Buccio mused, as his small troop rounded the shoulder of the hill and he caught sight of Jago's dun, set above the horse-runs and cattle pens and the apple-garth where small green fruit were now budding, perhaps the news was for the best, after all.

The fields and pens were once more busy with beasts and people as the troop passed, but Buccio noticed, as he rode in through the gateway and up towards the whale-backed Chieftain's Hall, that the people fell quiet when they saw him and did not meet his gaze. He could not much blame them: he could see, to his right, that workers were busy rebuilding one of the huts he had ordered burned a fortnight earlier.

Jago appeared from the direction of the building work as Buccio was dismounting outside the Hall. He was stripped to the waist and smears of dirt obscuring the tattoos on his arms as he wiped his hands on a cloth showed he had been busy among his people. He gave Buccio a cautious nod. "Tribune. Good fortune go with you."

Buccio dipped his head, knowing he fully deserved the rebuke of the formal greeting. "And with you, Lord Jago." He nodded towards the hut that was being repaired. "The building goes well?"

"The building goes well," Jago agreed. Though his words were courteous, there was none of the easy warmth in him that Buccio had seen and liked so much at their first meeting.

"Then I shall not keep you long from it." Pushing down the disappointment that welled up in him—yet had he really expected any other response from Jago?—Buccio hurried on to the reason for his visit. "I am come to thank the Tribe for giving over the men who killed my patrol. Also to let the Tribe know that the matter of those deaths is now considered closed; Rome has her satisfaction and hopes the peace we have enjoyed these past few days will long continue."

Jago gave a wordless nod, still watching Buccio closely. Though Buccio could have reached out and touched him, he felt as if all the length of the Empire lay between them, from Cappadocia to these rolling hills.

Taking a deep breath, Buccio went on, "Also to inform the Lord Jago and his people that there will be another new Commander soon. I hope he will.... will prove less ignorant of the ways of the Tribe and the business of the Tribe."

Buccio stumbled over the words as Jago went on looking at him, an odd expression settling on his face. "They are punishing you by sending you away?" he asked at last.

Buccio pressed his lips together for a moment to stop a bitter laugh from escaping him. "No. They are rewarding me. Apparently they have great need elsewhere of my skills at making peace among the tribes, in the lands north of Viroconium."

Jago was silent for a few moments, his dark-eyed gaze holding Buccio's. Then his expression softened a little. "I shall be sorry to see the Tribune leave."

Buccio raised his eyebrows. "I would have thought you would be sorry to see me stay, Lord Jago."

A corner of Jago's mouth quirked up in a wry smile. "But now I must train a new Commander," he pointed out, his tone only a little mocking. "And I may not find him so easy to my hand—nor so pleasant a companion on the hunting trail." The smile turned into something warmer. "Besides, I have had no chance to take the Tribune hunting to the west, as I promised."

Buccio swallowed down the sudden lump in his throat and said hoarsely, "I am sorry that we shall not hunt there also. But I release you from your promise."

"Nay." Now Jago was definitely smiling at him. "When the tribes north of Viroconium are at peace and you return to us, we shall hunt there still."

Buccio cast a glance over his shoulder at the rest of his escort waiting several yards away behind him. Turning back to Jago, he said softly, speaking so that only he might hear, "I fear that there will be no peace. That I shall choose poorly again and let my Roman anger blind me to greater wisdom. I do not think that I am suited to... to understanding the business of the frontier tribes."

"Perhaps." Jago tilted his head a little. "But I think you have more understanding than you did or credit yourself with." His tone turned more serious. "And you have done none so ill in the end. Constantius and his hearth companions were always a thorn in the side of my people, and you have helped us pluck it from our flank. For that alone, I think the gods have been kind to us in sending you to this place, even if they have tested us also."

As Buccio gaped at him, startled by his words, Jago reached out and grasped Buccio's shoulder. Instinctively, Buccio brought his hand up to grip Jago's as the other man said, with the dancing smile and the old warmth back in his voice, "If Rome sends us no worse, I shall not be grieved. And if you return soon for our hunting to the west, I shall surely not be grieved either."

Riding away a few minutes later, Buccio promised himself that, when the Legion allowed, he *would* return.

oOo

## 12. Return

Buccio's heart started to beat a little faster as the countryside around him became increasingly familiar. Though it was more than five years since he had last ridden this road, the lift of the approaching hills, the clumps of woodland that clustered here and there, the thickets of reeds that marked the course of the river that meandered now nearer, now further from the arrow-straight road: all was much as it had been.

The change was greater as he neared Corinium itself. The fort was a year gone, of course, following the decision—now the lands of the Dobunni were no longer on the frontier—to replace it with a new territorial capital built in the Roman style. The palisades and barrack blocks and the praetorium and other buildings in the principia had all been carefully removed, and the high earthen bank levelled and used to fill the deep ditch that once ran around it. Yet the roads still ran straight and true, so that Buccio could tell where his office and sleeping cell must once have been. Now, a new building was taking shape, the first layer of foundation stones almost complete: a basilica and forum for the new tribal capital.

Other buildings were rising here and there, among a dozen or so large plots marked out with pegs and string: one might be the public baths, Buccio decided, but the others seemed to be private houses. A gang of men were at work metalling a road that ran at right angles from the former Via Principia of the fort close to where the dexter gate had once stood.

Nearing the line of the infilled ditch, Buccio directed the junior official riding at his side to set up camp in the agreed spot, while he rode on towards the forum alone. A number of men were gathered there, deep in a discussion of some matter that required much waving of arms and pointing in various directions at the construction around them. They were dressed in Roman-style tunics, though most still wore native chequered trousers underneath against the spring chill. Several of them turned at his approach and Buccio's breath caught in his throat as he caught sight of the face of one of them.

The man said something to the rest and the group split up. Several of the men seemed in no great hurry to make their way to wherever they were going, and Buccio was aware of many eyes on him as he reined his horse in next to the man who had given the order to disperse.

He looked up at Buccio, his dark brown eyes warm with amusement. "They told us we were to expect a new procurator to oversee the building work—but they did not tell us who it would be." His hair had been clipped in the Roman fashion, but the flyaway brows and wry smile were the same; and even as he spoke, he unconsciously reached out and gentled the neck of Buccio's mare.

For a moment, Buccio did not move, still not quite believing his eyes, though he had expected—hoped—for this moment. Still uncertain, too, of whether he would be welcome or not. But when the man went on grinning up at him, apparently quite as pleased with this reunion as Buccio was, Buccio slipped from his horse and embraced him. "Jago!"

After a moment, Buccio pushed back, holding Jago by the shoulders. "You look well."

"So do you." Jago huffed a laugh and rolled a shoulder before adding with a mixture of pride and embarrassment, "They made me a magistrate."

"No toga?" Buccio took another look at the tunic, noting the purple stripe.

Jago laughed. "I'm working up to it. But come you to my home—" He caught the reins of Buccio's patient mount and began to turn her. "—and let us discuss how you will help me build this new town of mine. And then—" He threw a grin back over his shoulder in Buccio's direction. "—we shall plan how to steal the time for that day's hunting to the west I once promised you."

Following after Jago, Buccio made a mental note to pay a visit to the temple complex to be built behind the basilica once it was completed and raise an altar: "To the gods, that they have been kind."

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## End notes

This story is set in and around Cirencester (Roman Corinium), which was the base for a number of auxiliary cavalry units, including the First Thracian, in the years between the Roman conquest of Britain in AD43 and the creation of a new tribal capital on the site shortly after AD 70.

The local tribe were the Dobunni, who were generally friendly towards their Roman conquerors. I have used the Iron Age oppidum (or town) at Bagendon, around four miles from Cirencester, as the site of Jowan and Jago's dun, while I have based Constantius' people at another oppidum that has been identified at Salmonsbury near Bourton-on-the-Water. This lies a dozen miles to the north of Cirencester on the Fosse Way, the Roman road from Exeter to Lincoln which runs through Cirencester.

The cursus where the midsummer gathering takes place and Jowan is murdered is intended to be the neolithic one at Lechlade that (in the tradition of many scenes in Rosemary Sutcliff's works) my Iron Age tribe has re-purposed as the site of a midsummer fair. The valley where Beck's troops break up the fight over the stolen cattle is meant to be the one that now contains the magnificent Roman villa complex of Chedworth.

The personal names in the area in the early Roman period would belong to a dialect of the Brythonic language, most likely a precursor of Welsh. However, the Cotswolds are most definitely "West Country" rather than "Welsh" and I have therefore chosen to use personal names from the only surviving "West Country" Brythonic language, modern Cornish. (To aid readers familiar with Jericho, I have tried to use names reminiscent of the names of the canon characters.) The Roman version of Beck has, of course, a full set of praenomen, nomen and cognomen.

In looking for a military rank for Buccio/Beck that would provide a good counterpart to his rank as a US Army major in canon, I settled on making him one of the five Tribuni Angusticlavii or narrow-stripe tribunes in his legion. These tribunes were career officers, typically from an equestrian background, on a standardised career path which took them from roles as local administrators through mid-ranking military command positions to senior military or administrative posts.