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Page 1 – THE WARRING STATES: PTOLEMAIC CODE by Anthony St. George. Anthony St. George lives with his husband in San Francisco where he is writing his novel, “Ann History,” and an accompanying short story collection, “The Warring States.” He has a Ph.D. in Classical Chinese and Korean literature, and endeavors to keep up with his varying levels of proficiency in Mandarin, French, Korean, German, and Japanese.

Page 10 – RACHEL AND THE SHAPE-SHIFTER by K. A. Williams. K. A. Williams lives in North Carolina and writes mystery/crime, speculative, and general fiction which has been published in various magazines including *Corner Bar*, *Yellow Mama*, *Literary Yard*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Calliope*, *Transfigured Lit*, *The Creativity Webzine*, *View From Atlantis*, *Trembling With Fear*, *Altered Reality*, *Bewildering Stories*, *The Rockford Review*, and *Mystery Tribune*. She also writes poetry and apart from writing, enjoys music, movies and text adventure games.

Page 13 – LUPUS INIMICUS by C. M. Barnes. C.M. Barnes lives and writes in New Mexico. His work has appeared in *American Short Fiction*, *Digital Americana*, *Booth*, and elsewhere. His work is forthcoming in *Schlock Magazine*, *Anotherealm*, *Allegory*, and *Cosmic Horror*. He is currently at work on a collection of interwoven speculative tales and a novel. Read more at silenceoncebroken.com.



“THE WARRING STATES: PTOLEMAIC CODE”

by ANTHONY ST. GEORGE

“Oh, I’m a king all right,” he said, jutting his pudgy chin forward. “If not an emperor. My mother ensured it. Last descendant of the lines of Nurhaci and Ptolemy.”

Gorbin looked at his new potential employer: a surprisingly agile, five-ten-ish, acorn-skinned man in his late fifties, on his head a mushroom cap of chestnut hair. His eyelids had the same epicanthic fold that Gorbin himself had. With his bearing, this royal pedigree seemed plausible.

“I see,” Gorbin said. “So, does one address you as Supreme Majesty or Your Highness?”

“Come now, we’re in America... or what’s left of it. We dropped that over three hundred years ago with the declaration of independence!”

The man had greeted Gorbin in a worn, embroidered robe of yellow and blue silk; images of clouds and Chinese dragons danced under a white bandolier covered in Egyptian hieroglyphs. The frayed, piped edging of a light-blue pajama top peeked out from behind the collar of the robe.

Gorbin had rarely encountered this level of pretension before. Human service—a benefit that the wealthy still preferred over middle-class servobots—was a good living. A good position came with a lot of perks

beyond the steady income: luxe housing, fresh vegetables, transportation that didn’t have to be booked. Gorbin had enjoyed some of these in past positions... as long as the employers’ money held out.

“So, how am I to address you then?” Gorbin said, unsure whether to bow, as some of his former employers had required or to nod politely.

“I’m working on getting my new proper name made official. I’ve got to get a new identity number assigned, and with so many files lost with the transfer from DC to Chicago over the past two years, confirming who I say I am has been a bit cumbersome.”

“And the name?” Gorbin held back a look of *just answer my question*.

“Fernand Jurched Ptolemus. But you can keep it easy and address me as ‘Sir.’”

Gorbin had been with the last of the flyer families of the Dogg-Roosevelts and Carnegie y Slims over the past fifteen years when the turmoil of the Warring States had taken them from Manhattan to the Jackson Hole redoubt. After the worst of the turmoil, they’d ended up in Gorbin’s new hometown of Minneapolis. With his previous employers, he’d left when he saw the writing on the wall: first, the gardener would be let go, then the chef. Once the

driver had been dismissed, Gorbin knew he'd only have a month or two left. If this position was going to last, he was going to have to assess this man's situation.

"Mr. Ptolemus, sir. You've been here in town how long?"

"Sixteen months, but we've only just moved to this penthouse a month ago. As you can see, I haven't been too good at unpacking."

Sixteen months. That would put him amongst the flyer groups from Austin, Texas, the last batch of climate refugees to which the city had opened its gates.

"And who's the 'We'?"

"I misspoke slightly. I was referring to my valet, but I had to let him go....," the man's voice became stern, "he tried to steal from me."

Gorbin noted the warning. "So, the actual position is what? I was led to believe it was House Manager," Gorbin said, trying to get a glimpse of something impressive in the apartment.

"It is. Well, it will be. Once I can afford to hire more."

"I'm sorry?"

"I've got to sell a few more of these." He gestured to a silver reticule hanging from the bottom of the bandolier.

"The bag?"

"No, these." The man pulled the bag up for easier viewing and pointed to a line of petite rectangular sapphires at the lip of the bag. Two blank spots suggested missing gems. "Inside these are digital files. Rights to original artwork that my parents had invested in. My mother thought up this

inconspicuous storage method."

Gorbin's eyes squinted as he calculated. There were at least ten stones left. Gorbin estimated perhaps two years of steady employment, depending on what they'd contained. He'd have to do some research.

"Now, tell me a little more about you. Gorbin Leigh? What kind of name is that? Doesn't quite match what I see."

"Well, I'm Korean. Leigh was originally spelled L-E-E. Gorbin was just a name my parents made up to throw off school administrators when they applied for schooling for me. They didn't want a traditional Korean name for fear of having my application get sent straight to the circular file."

"Korean? Right. Great. Very impressive culture. Lovely dresses."

He almost sounds sincere, Gorbin sneered to himself.

"Look, if you'd like the job, I think I like you. Why don't you give it a day and let me know? I'll hold off on other interviews until 2 pm tomorrow."

"2 pm? Why that specific time?"

"I've got someone lined up for 2:15 pm, and I'd need to give them a little notice if I'm going to cancel their interview."

How generous, Gorbin thought.

#

Within three days, Gorbin was employed with Sir. Gorbin had done his research, such that he could find. The man had indeed come up from Austin, Texas. He was definitely from money, but there was little else he could uncover. *He'd paid for digital erasure*, Gorbin surmised.

He tried to find something further up

the family tree. The history of the Ptolemies was of little interest to Gorbin. The Nurhaci line, however, caught his eye. They were a Manchu family that founded the Qing Dynasty, *the one that the Korean Yi Dynasty had had to submit to resentfully*. Gorbin remembered learning this from a college course he'd taken on East Asian history. The Yi had been a glorious dynasty for almost five hundred years, responsible for the founding of the Korean writing system, the flourishing of native art and literature, the rigid Confucian socio-political system, and the dynasty's loyalty to the Chinese Ming Dynasty that Nurhaci and his sons had overrun.

According to his mother, Gorbin and his siblings were direct descendants of the royal family, too, though their economic circumstances never betrayed that fact. Leigh... Lee... Rhee... Yi: the variant spellings of his family name in their displacements across the globe came to him. From the ancient capital of Seoul, his branch of the family had moved to Kyoto, then the Philippines, then in the early twenty-first century, first LA, then Flushing, New York. His mother had paid for digital access to their family *chokp'o*—a genealogy, the one Korean word Gorbin did know. His mother had maintained their membership fees to be listed amongst the descendants of the Yi royal family in defiance of the frequent accusations leveled about pretenders and adopted sons.

If Mom and Dad knew, they wouldn't be so happy. For this reason only, Gorbin was relieved that he was now an orphan.

Taking the job, Gorbin started work immediately two days after his interview, and he and his employer quickly fell into getting to know each other's patterns. Or, more accurately, Gorbin got to know his employer: his preferred eating schedules, his strolls in the parks passing for exercise, his thin local network, his plans for inserting himself into Minneapolis society. The man appeared generous, however, with modest gifts to the flyer animal shelter and the Anishnaabe political action group. Gorbin settled into his new job quickly, and within three days under Gorbin's management, the chaos of cardboard boxes quickly disappeared, and the apartment began to sparkle.

#

Four sold sapphires later, as spring brought chartreuse, white, and pink to the branches off the penthouse deck, Mr. Ptolemus, his name now official, informed Gorbin that he was ready to host a party. Describing similar celebrations held in Austin and the previous spring and summer here in Minneapolis, Mr. Ptolemus described his format for the parties. This one, he explained, would begin with an explosion of vacuum dust.

Along with his sleeper trunks of clothing, art books, three sets of china, and an abundance of pillows, Mr. Ptolemus had brought with him a small brass cannon that he had used in Austin to signal the start and end of his cocktail parties. He described the act to Gorbin. In Austin, he would load the cannon with something precious and breakable: a watch from the previous season that he no longer wanted to

wear, a *raku* tea bowl from a tea ceremony he had no patience for, a stuffed toy rabbit his nanny had given him. Since coming to Minneapolis, however, he had turned to shooting out fully used vacuum bags.

"It's a new thing I do. It's my form of protest," Gorbin's boss explained. "As happy as I am to have landed back in civilization, I resent having been forced to move. I loved my life in Austin."

Mr. Ptolemus showed Gorbin a video of the last party of the previous summer. After the bang and amidst huzzahs and laughter, guests watched the particles cover the pool in scintillating silica before they sank, mud-grey, towards the pool's aquamarine bottom. Realizing that they were covered in the same grime, guests would shriek or tut as they wiped the debris from their shoulders and hems. Mr. Ptolemus explained his rationale. As most of them were transplants themselves, they would laugh and shake their heads cheerfully, some making noises of approval at their host's sagacity.

#

"You see," Mr. Ptolemus explained in the late afternoon as he and Gorbin readied the home for the coming evening affair. "I had such a wonderful world there. Mum and Dad were alive for some of it... before the water situation weakened them, and we had to put them in suspension."

Gorbin almost asked about the water situation but then remembered he was probably referring to the drying out of most of the cities in the Southwest. Water treatment plants faltered as city and state budg-

ets switched their emphasis to building up defenses and flyer processing stations.

In some cities, the wholesale flight of government officials meant even fully automated infrastructure systems started to fail, with their internal clocks losing time and throwing off stoplights and conveyors and food storage systems. Those problems were above and beyond the digital network hacking infiltrations that had started the decline and fragmentation of the States. Austin had held out well, even with the war across the border. If Texas hadn't seceded before the fighting with Mexico began, maybe the other states would have sent reinforcements.

"You put your parents in suspension? What exactly is that?" Gorbin couldn't help himself, though he had a feeling he shouldn't ask about something so private.

"It's a euphemism for an induced coma. A lot of friends in our circle were doing it. It makes it easier for people to get the elderly in their families transported to safety. And it also saves on care bills enormously."

"Where are your parents now, then?"

"In Austin... we weren't allowed to transport them in the convoy." Mr. Ptolemus gazed out from his seventeenth-floor condo overlooking the Hennepin Avenue City Gate on the Mississippi. Transports lined up across the bridge as drivers pressed their fingers to monitors, and dronebots inspected the contents of the vehicles with their various sensors. "I can't get them sent up until Texas and Mexico negotiate a peace."

“Surely there’s someone you could pay to facilitate expedited access?” Gorbin was familiar with how things worked with these kinds of families. As much as he was growing fond of his employer, the remembrance of such perks made his skin prickle.

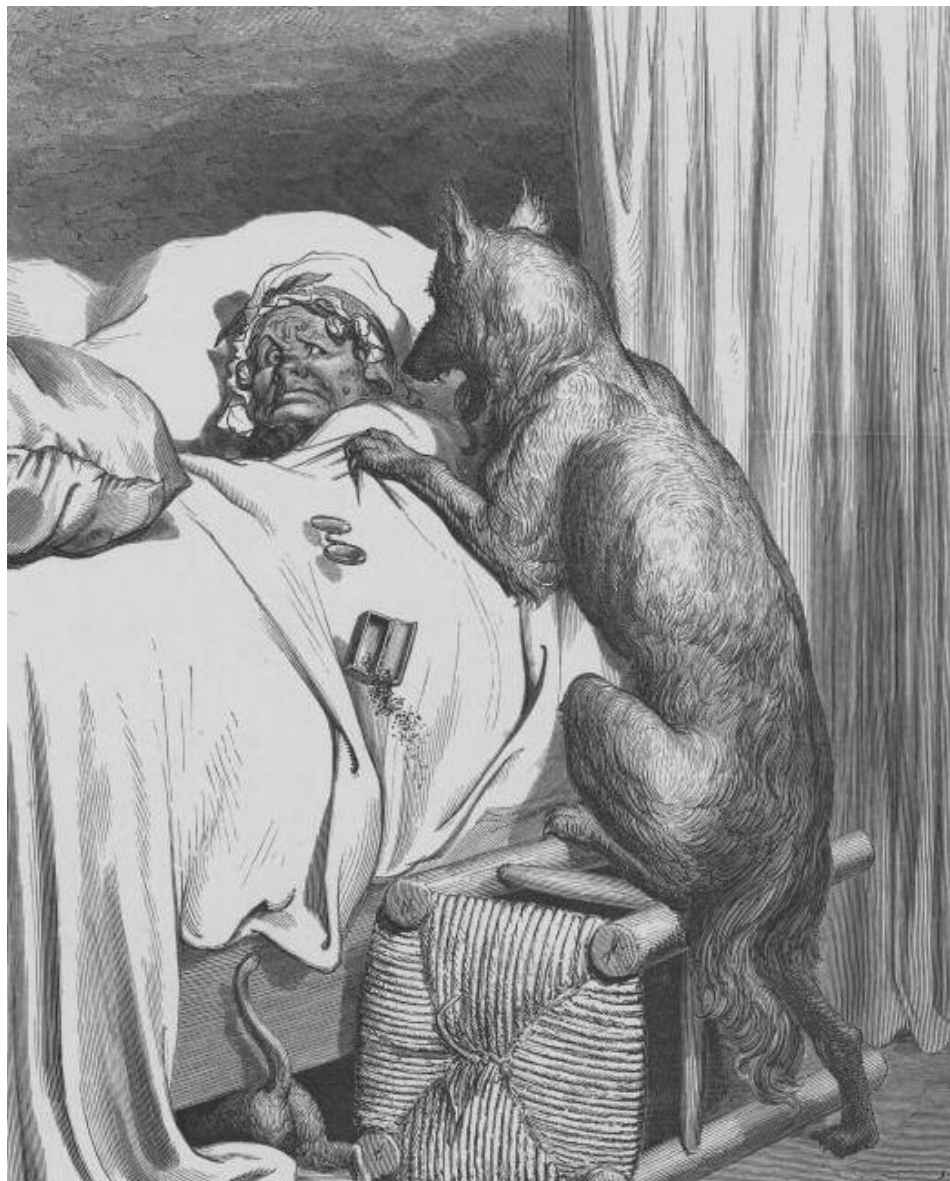
“Well... I would,” Mr. Ptolemus

explained, “but....”

Gorbin couldn’t help himself, “But?”

“Well. Look, I trust you. Not a word to my new circle, OK? It’s hard enough getting into the right society as a flyer, even with enough money to toss about.”

“I would never say a thing, Mr.



Ptolemus.”

“Well, the reason is: I’ve not been a good manager of my resources.”

He was running out of money. The first sign of “time to leave.” Gorbin pretended not to notice and tried to change the subject.

“Well, we’ll find a way to get them here. You must be grateful to them.”

“I am. They were the ones who resurrected our line.”

“Your line?”

“Yes, I told you. My antecedent lines.”

“Resurrected?” Gorbin rubbed his itching temple.

“Hadn’t I told you? I was sure I had.”

Mr. Ptolemus raised his almost empty glass of iced tea at Gorbin. Gorbin lifted it lightly from his hand. “Don’t go just yet. I’ll explain. My grandfather, you see, had done well in the shoe business.”

“How does that...?”

“Please don’t interrupt,” Mr. Ptolemus said, raising his left eyebrow. “If you remember, the refugee crisis in the south was horrific thirty years ago. Wait, of course, you don’t remember. You probably weren’t even born.”

Gorbin gazed at a placid oil painting of an indigenous family harvesting wild rice, a work done by a local star from a recent gallery showing who “...was on everyone’s list,” Mr. Ptolemus had explained. “As a flyer, I’ve got to show I care about the community and am here to stay. Purchases like this put my crowd at ease.”

Gorbin had heard this line of reasoning before, though he wasn’t sure the local well-to-do wouldn’t be well familiar with the tac-

tic already, having committed the same act themselves when they’d arrived. Though the flyers weren’t foreign, the anger and resentment at their arrival in any city still brought out the ugliest of reactions from the local citizens.

“My grandfather saw an opportunity. He couldn’t stand seeing children in such poor conditions. Their feet, at least. He’d been a shoemaker.”

The ice clinked in the glass in Gorbin’s hand as it melted.

“My grandfather, at my mother’s insistence, decided he would get those children well shod. So, using repurposed plastics from waste dumps and recycled corks, he set up shop to make shoes.”

“Corkies,” Gorbin said with a smile, “Yes, I remember. I had an electric blue pair myself as a kid. That was your grandfather?”

“Yeah,” Mr. Ptolemus’s smile matched Gorbin’s. “A border guard suggested he get a contract to produce them for the government. He sold them for peanuts, but the volume was enough to enable investment in production. Buying tracts of land in Louisiana and New Mexico as they emptied out, he started cork tree farms. Those genetically modified ones that grow like weeds with minimal need for water.”

This was starting to be a long story, and Gorbin wanted to get to the part about his lineage. Maybe he could jog him back to the point faster with a diversion. “Did you want some more tea, Mr. Ptolemus?”

“With some vodka this time, Gorbin, yes, please,” he said with a faint snort.

Gorbin stepped crisply to the bar in

the next room, fulfilled the demand, and brought the drink back to Mr. Ptolemus's outstretched hand. Gorbin wanted to get back to the topic of family lines. "So, your grandfather became very wealthy. But what does that have to do with your heritage?"

"Right, thank you for getting me back on track." Mr. Ptolemus pulled back the sleeves of his black-and-ochre robe, revealing hairy arms that Gorbin hadn't noticed before. "So, my grandfather had been told by his great grandfather that he came from a line of great Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt, which was slightly plausible because of his dark hair and brown, well, pale brown, skin. When my grandfather looked into it, he learned that either Drusilla, the daughter, or Julia Urania, the wife of the last king, Ptolemy of Mauretania, had secreted a thigh bone from his remains before the coffin was immured in the ruler's mausoleum in Algeria. This bone had been passed down through generations, and years ago, one of our family members, a biologist, extracted the DNA from the bone."

The family was known for inbreeding, Mr. Ptolemus explained, and they were using the genetic information for study. "At any rate, long story short: with his profits from the Corkies, my grandfather was able to purchase the bone and pay a professor in Colombia to do some isolation of traits particular to that DNA. I forget what they're called, 'snips' or 'snaps' or something, but basically, they were noticeable traits of the Ptolemies, and my grandfather had them injected into himself and my father. Our color skin, our forelock, my eyes, my boney

shoulders, etc. So, this is how we, and everyone else, know we are Ptolemies."

"Fascinating," Gorbin said as if he hadn't heard of this genetic engineering thing before. Usually, it had just been used for cosmetic changes or precautionary add-ons recommended by family planning doctors. He'd heard of a scurrilous Eastern European gun-runner who had created a bank of his family's traits and then injected unsuspecting illegal workers at his factory with some of these genetic packets. It was reported he'd done it both to disguise the workers, but some speculated that he'd done it to ensure his family's survival. The story was discounted as Central States' anti-Russian propaganda almost immediately.

Gorbin was eager to drill down to his real interest. "And the Nurhaci line? Was that similar? From your mother's side?"

"Well, sort of. My mother has the entire genealogy of her Manchurian ancestors." Mr. Ptolemus pointed to a set of scrolls hanging over the living room mantlepiece. "Those are written in the original Manchu script that Nurhaci commissioned into existence in the sixteenth century. My father bought those for my mother at auction after the skirmishes with China... Let's say he," Mr. Ptolemus put down his glass to enable him to make an air quotes gesture, "loosened them from their holding place."

Gorbin sat on the chrome-painted plastic stool beside Mr. Ptolemus's burnt pumpkin velvet armchair. "And so, it's certain you're a descendant?"

"Yes. And my father did get my mother some back-up injections from a Manchurian

diaspora family that had settled on the Korean peninsula two generations ago.”

“I see,” Gorbin said as a fantasy sprang into his mind. How easily he could just become this man’s direct descendant and inherit what remained of his wealth. But those shots would require some money, and he wasn’t about to liberate a gem from his boss’s pouch. *Maybe that’s what the fired valet had tried to do...* And becoming any bit Nurhaci would negate his own ancestry. He couldn’t disappoint his parents, even with them gone.

Mr. Ptolemus looked outside again and suddenly stiffened. “Look,” he said, “the sun’s going down, and we’ve got to get ready for the party.”

“Yes, sir, I’ve got it all handled.”

“I’m sorry to have gone on. It must all sound very elitist to you. These people and their bloodlines and the money to keep them going.”

Or construct them, Gorbin thought.

“You know, I just realized I never asked you about your background. If you know it.” Mr. Ptolemus said, rising from his chair. “Hold that thought,” he said, raising a hand, “let me change for the party, and then you can tell me.”

Gorbin turned and headed to the bedroom to open the door for his employer.

After ten minutes, Mr. Ptolemus came back into the room in a black pinstripe suit over a magenta business shirt. A large, rectangular turquoise bolo cinched his collar. “All I need is my cowboy hat... the white one,” he said, turning around for Gorbin to give him his assurance that everything was

fitting properly. “That was one of the things I had to leave behind. I just couldn’t fit it in the hatbox without it crushing my Panama hat and fedora. Besides, I didn’t want to be so easily identified as coming from Texas. One has to know what to share and what to hide with this crowd. Especially when you’re first trying to fit in.”

Gorbin opened the sliding doors onto the deck and let the evening breeze cool the room. The hot summer day was tempering, but it was still warm enough for them to keep access to the deck and pool open.

“Gorbin,” Mr. Ptolemus raised a hand to stop him before he turned to another task. “You were going to tell me about your background.”

Gorbin was carrying a tray of wine glasses out to the deck. He rested it on the table until he saw Mr. Ptolemus’s disapproving eye and immediately took it back up in his arms. He hadn’t given thought to what he would tell his boss about his family, but he went with his intuition not to share. “Oh, it’s nothing interesting. You already know I’m Korean.”

“Korean-American. You must never forget the country that has supported you.”

Gorbin held back a grimace.

“I’m so sorry about what’s happened there now, with China and everything.”

“Yeah,” Gorbin said, “not my problem.”

Mr. Ptolemus’s eyes widened, not expecting Gorbin’s curtness.

“Such a lovely culture,” Mr. Ptolemus continued. “The ribbons and the dancing and the dresses. I’m sure you’re very proud

of your heritage.”

Gorbin refrained from responding, hoping Mr. Ptolemus’s blather would stop.

“Look, don’t forget the cannon. I hope you remembered to polish it. It’s a bit of a trademark of mine.”

Gorbin remained focused and lay out the linen napkins on a table near the sliding glass door.

“Did you? Did you polish it? I don’t pay you to forget these things.”

“Yes, Mr. Ptolemus, I polished it.”

“And you’ve loaded it with the vacuum bag?”

“Not yet, Sir.”

“Well, hurry it up, man. There’s still a lot for you to do.”

That was it. Regardless of whether it was party anxiety or no, Gorbin couldn’t accept that tone. His forearms and legs suddenly felt like a rash had broken out. He had been annoyed by his employers before, but never to this extent. If he didn’t do something, Gorbin foresaw a summer of increasing insults and degradation.

Withdrawing silently, in ten rushed steps, Gorbin found himself in the kitchen slamming down trays, jingling glasses, muttering to himself: “That’s enough, King Ptolemy, and you and your Manchu bits. Have you screened your guests to make sure none of them are descendants of the Ming?”

Gorbin looked over at the cannon shining on the countertop. An idea came to him.

The vodka bottle, where is that? His cheeks would burn red with his allergy, but

he didn’t care. He emptied the last of its contents down his throat. The bite and burn distracted him from every other signal his body had been firing. *A little wadding,* he said to himself, taking his employer’s dirty linen napkin from lunch. He inserted the empty bottle into the nozzle of the cannon. It fit right in. *If I aim just right, it’ll look like an accident.*

Gorbin wiped his mouth with his sleeve and carried the cannon out to the deck.

“Shall we try it a little early, Sir? Before the guests arrive?”

Mr. Ptolemus looked out at Gorbin and made his way out to the deck. It was a beautiful evening. Everything was laid out to perfection: the party would be a success. “Good thinking, man,” he said.

Gorbin smiled obligingly, holding the pullcord loosely in his fingers.

It won’t kill him. Just teach him a lesson. He’ll either get the message or fire me. But right now, I don’t care. If he lost his job, there would be other potential employers there that evening. Gorbin had a moment of wondering why he was so furious. Was it this Manchu-Korean enmity dug into his bones?

The answer came as his employer rubbed his hands together in anticipation, chortling a happy, “Here we go!”

With the pull of the cord, Gorbin had his answer. Escaping from his mouth came the phrase, “Long Live the Yi!”



“RACHEL AND THE SHAPE-SHIFTER”

by K. A. WILLIAMS

I had been gathering blackberries and strawberries in my basket and sat down on a stumpfacing the lake to rest as I watched a duck swimming toward the shore.

It waded out and waddled up to me. “Could I please have some of your food?” it asked.

A duck was speaking to me. Was I crazy? I was glad I was sitting down. I held out some blackberries and the duck ate them out of my hand. “I didn’t know ducks could talk,” I said.

“I’m not really a duck, I’m a shape-shifter. That means I can change forms. Like so.”

I had heard of some people having visions but first they had to eat or drink something special. Even though I hadn’t, I was now seeing a duck growing bigger and changing into a man.

I pulled the shawl from around my shoulders and handed it to him. “What’s this for?” he asked.

“Uh...”

He looked down at his naked body. “Oh right. Humans and their modesty issues.” He wrapped my shawl around his waist and looked in the basket on my lap. “Can I have some strawberries? All I had on my ship was freeze-dried stuff that’s guaranteed to last forever and tastes awful.”

I gave him some strawberries. “Ship? There’s no ocean near here.”

He gulped them down. “Not that kind of ship. A spaceship.”

“Spaceship?”

“There is life on other planets. Up there.” He pointed skyward. “We can build ships that fly through space instead of swim on the water.”

“Your ship can fly?”

“It could before I hit that asteroid. I had to make an emergency landing and I saw this huge lake. I’ve been living on ration bars and learning this area of the planet’s culture and language from my computer.”

“I can understand your words but they don’t make sense.”

“I’ll try to explain it simply. My ship hit something big that broke it so it can’t fly anymore. It’s now at the bottom of the lake and I’m stranded on this planet.”

I looked at the lake and tried to imagine a ship that could fly, and wished I could have seen it.

“My name is Statismackogrot. Just call me Mack. What’s your name and do you think I could live in your village? Would they accept an outsider?”

“My name’s Rachel, and they would accept you since you now look more like

them than I do.”

“I don’t understand. You look human to me. What are you talking about?”

I shifted on the stump. My tail whipped out and tickled his ear and patted his head.

He laughed and caught it gently and inspected it. “A prehensile tail.”

“My parents told me they cut it off once but it grew back.”

“Ouch. I don’t think they’re your real parents though, are they?”

I pulled my tail out of his hands and it wound around my waist. “They said they found me wandering in the woods near this lake and adopted me. They’ve always been kind to me apart from cutting my tail off that is. I was very young and don’t remember.”

“Have you seen a spaceship around here? Oh right, you wouldn’t know what one looks like. Have you seen anything unusual?”

I got off the stump. “The other children wouldn’t play with me because of my tail so I’d play out here in the woods by myself. There is something different. I’ll show you.” He followed me through the woods to the odd thing I discovered one day.

I showed him the big silver object. “Wow! It’s intact.” He sounded excited and walked all the way around it. “Do you see the tiny holes all over it? I’ve got some repair gel in my ship. It should work. Now if we can just find a way inside. I’ll bet it’s voice activated. Say the word open.”

“Open.”

Nothing happened at first then a

doorway appeared where it had been solid before. He went inside and I followed.

The things within were so strange, I could barely describe them. Two chairs sat in front of what looked like a table with no legs that was somehow attached to a wall. Neither was made of wood and were the same silver color as the outside. Big bones were sitting in the chairs.

Mack touched something on the wall in front of the chairs and it started talking but I couldn’t understand the words. Little people appeared. I tried to touch them but they seemed to be flat and stuck to the wall. He seemed to know what they said and glanced at me several times. Then they suddenly disappeared.

He turned to me. “I could understand their language because I’ve studied it before. Their home planet is in the same solar system as mine. Your name is Dumartrana. Those were your real parents on the computer screen. According to them, this ship ran into a micrometeoroid storm and the air leaked out faster than the ship could replace it because of all the holes. Two of the three escape pods were also filled with holes. Your parents put you in the only good escape pod and set their ship on auto pilot.”

“What happened to them?”

Mack looked at the bones in the seats.

“Oh,” I said. “How awful.”

Tears filled my eyes as he grew more arms and gathered up all the bones. “I’ll just go bury them now.”

I wiped the tears from my face and followed Mack outside. He became an

animal that resembled a giant mole and dug into the ground. He laid the bones inside the hole he'd made and covered it quickly.

When he saw me watching, he became a man again and tied my shawl back around his waist. "I'll get some stuff from my ship and fix your ship so it'll fly again. Come

with me, Dumartrana, you will never be happy here and when your adopted parents die, you'll be alone. Think about it."

I didn't need to think about it, Mack was right, and the idea of flying through space excited me. "Yes, I'd like to come with you." ❖



“LUPUS INIMICUS”

by C. M. BARNES

Honored Praetor,

May the gods find you well.

I feel it incumbent on me to report my findings in a letter to you, for I doubt now that I will ever return to Rome, let alone find myself in your wise presence again. It is my hope that, in my place, this missive will find you in time to act upon what I write. Considering the distance it must travel to reach you, even the gods could not guarantee this outcome, but, as your loyal servant, I will offer prayers and what sacrifice I can for its swift passage nonetheless.

As you might have guessed, I write to you from the furthest border of our territory in Britannia. North of me lies only the fog of mysterious Caledonia, where our 9th Spanish Legion disappeared nearly a year ago today. Under your seal, I have pursued the mission upon which you dispatched me. Namely, to discover the fate of the 9th, and, if possible, recover its eagle standard for the Emperor, thus excising the shame of such an unforeseeable defeat. Let me say at the outset that I have not recovered the eagle. However, I do have knowledge of its whereabouts, or at least I believe I do. I cannot verify this without taking steps that will likely result in my death—or worse. If that sounds dramatic in the hysterical manner of

a Greek drama, I hope you will forgive me. I am under great stress and writing quickly. Very soon now, I will have no choice but to take those very steps, and I only hope the gods will take pity on me when I do.

I arrived here at the border two days ago, and the local garrison received me honorably and with proper sacrifice. We are all Roman men after all, and they made me feel welcome even though I was tired and weak from my journey north from Londinium. This Britain is a rugged country, my friend, full of windswept plains reminiscent of Iberia and dark forests to rival that of Teutoburg. However, I rode in good company amid a personal guard of hearty young centurions put at my disposal by the provincial governor. While the journey was taxing, we encountered no resistance from the local population. It is my understanding that they have made their peace with Caesar's rule, whichever current Caesar that might be. The only meaningful violence to speak of exists here, along the invisible line in the earth that divides the civilization below from the barbarity above. It was into that barbarity that the 9th advanced under orders from the local tribune. They went in the hope, I gather, of obtaining intelligence on the movements of a mysterious and savage group of tribesmen who live to the

north. Apparently, this tribune, Livius, feared the staging of a massed assault on the border. Unfortunately, he also accompanied the 9th on this expedition and, like everyone else on that fated campaign, has not been seen or heard from since.

Since that time, the local garrison has dutifully maintained its position on the border in the hope that some remnant of its main force will return. Needless to write, it has not, and I hope you will not fault these men for what might seem like undue caution. The days when a few legionnaires could simply stride forth in their gleaming armor and put a horde of superstitious wildmen to flight have long passed, at least in this part of the world. Rather, the Emperor's remaining foes here have become battle tested and unafraid of all but the most overwhelming force. Such an overwhelming force is no longer at the local commanders' disposal, and the officers that remain have had to resort to more subtle tactics.

All this was explained to me upon my arrival, including the necessity of working with the local herders to make up for the lack of soldierly eyes facing north. Fortunately, these locals are deeply practiced in this art, having long suffered raids from bands of those same brutal and mysterious tribesmen Livius feared. I am told they never venture out into their fields except in large groups with torches and scythes at the ready, and never after dark. I must admit, this surprised me, even acquainted as I now am with the wildness of this island. It is rare one finds a herding

people with even a semblance of military thinking. But, then again, the longer I live, the stranger the things I see.

Informed of this troubling state of affairs, I shook off my exhaustion and immediately requested an escort to the nearest village in the hope of speaking with the local chieftains. It has long been my experience that men understand their homelands far better than any foreigner could, including those lands' most arcane secrets. To be clear, I did not yet suspect anything arcane, per se, let alone evil magic. You and I both know how many supposedly invincible wizards and shamans have shaken their sticks at our approaching eagles only to fall under their bronze might. And yet, I think I already had a sense that something beyond the mere logic of conquest and resistance was at work. I could see it in our own soldier's eyes whenever they peered north into the mist, as if mentally pacing out the strides between themselves and some invisible threat beyond. This was not the usual look of a young legionnaire far from home. It was something deeper, more insidious, more fearful, as if they knew, on some level I was only beginning to sense, that whatever was out there had not only consumed the 9th but might consume the world itself. Watching those wide-eyed men, it was easy to imagine a lurking she-wolf the likes of which would make even Romulus shudder. Some of this was no doubt a symptom of my fatigue, but not all...

I digress.

The local villagers also received me with honors and sacrifice proper to their

station. Their council of chieftains invited both myself and my guards to dine in their great hall, an invitation I accepted despite fearing the food such simple men might prepare. At first, it appeared that my fear would not be disappointed. I exaggerate not when I say they set a platter of raw and bloody flesh before myself and my party. I know not what reaction they expected, but they watched me intently from the moment the platter was set down. Of course, I did not partake, as did none of my men, and, after a tense moment, the platter was removed again by shuddering servants. Strangely, I could not help but think that we had passed some kind of test, odd as it might be, and this thought was rewarded when new platters of properly cooked meat were laid before us. There was even wine (a gift, apparently, from the vanished tribune), and no longer a drop of fresh blood in sight.

After the necessary formalities, I asked the council their opinion as to the fate of the 9th. Surely, an entire legion of disciplined and well-equipped fighting men had not simply disappeared into the air just north of their settlement without any sign coming to them. If nothing else, some armor (if not the much-coveted eagle) would have made its way to their market in the wagon of some scurrilous battlefield vulture. But they disavowed any knowledge—not only of the 9th's fate, but of any battle taking place. For all they professed to know, there were not even any settlements to the north, only the savage tribesmen they feared and that deep, gods-forsaken fog that never

seems to lift. Lest you think I have grown soft in the pursuit of my duties, I considered having them arrested and tortured on the spot to bring the truth out, but their terrified looks, looks not so different from those I had seen on our own soldiers, convinced me that they were deeply committed to this lie. I would gain no information I could not more easily get from, say, a local layabout arrested and whipped on some pretense into revealing what was communally-known. What was more, I would not lose the good will of our nearest allies on the border, a necessity considering the garrison's depleted state. With this in mind, I thanked them for their honors and withdrew to the garrison fortress to ponder my next action.

It seemed prudent not to journey north myself, even with whatever escort the garrison could muster. If the entire 9th had been overwhelmed, we would stand no chance against attack, and I doubt I could have convinced what men remained at my disposal to follow me anyhow. (Even a legate's seal can fail to move quivering hearts this far from Rome.) On second thought, I was also not eager to begin brutalizing the locals for information, as the gods only knew whom might prove influential in gathering a host if that feared attack should materialize. Rather, it seemed prudent to seek intelligence by other means—namely, through the Christian monastery I was told lay in the opposite direction from the village. Knowing our Emperor's tolerant views on this peculiar sect, I trust you will not think me disloyal. Such men (for it is

usually gatherings of men, I am told) are widely known for their commitment to knowledge and record keeping. Surely, they would have some memory of the 9th's disposition before it vanished from the earth. It is not unlikely that there were even some followers of the so-called King of the Jews within its ranks.

Comforted by this plan, I went to my bed chamber with something like a clear heart. I write something because that oppressive mist remained all around the darkened fort, obscuring even the new, full moon. Not even drawing the shutters and the drapes could hold its creeping chill from my room, and it soon extinguished the fire I had ordered built in the hearth. Resolved to brave the frontier, I did not summon a servant to rebuild the flame but rather burrowed into the stinking pile of wool furs I had been provided. Mindful of your dear Stoics, I even challenged myself to imagine the pain of the guards on watch upon the wall, their shivering bodies alone and bared to the night's creeping elements. This image comforted me, and I managed to drift into Hypnos' arms before I was shortly awoken again by the most blood-curdling sound I had yet heard in this life.

It was a howl, my friend—a wolf's howl the likes of which I cannot describe properly other than to once again bring to mind a shaken Romulus. Its awful sound cut through the shutters and drapes and filled the chamber around me as if the creature itself was present at the foot of my bed. At the least, it had come from no further than the foot of the fortress wall, and the answer-

ing rush of heavy sandals and greaved legs rushing by my window told me I was not alone in hearing this fearful noise. I am not ashamed to say I nearly stuck my tousled head out that very window to inquire after my safety. I know such behavior is not becoming for a man of my station. I am always to set an example: the true Roman, unshaken by any enemy but that of his own failures of will. However, I suspect even you might have struggled to remain calm with that terrible sound echoing in your skull.

Even as I listened, it came again, washing up the fortress wall like a great wave of ice destined for the ears. In its wake, I could hear many Latinate voices now gathered along the ramparts. It sounded as if the entire garrison had mustered, spears at the ready, and this only to face a single, wild dog. Reluctant as I was to leave my furs, I forced myself to rise, dress, and venture forth onto the wall as well. My former confession aside, I have never been a coward, and I had no intention of starting that night. When I reached the gathered soldiers, I pulled aside a weathered-looking centurion and inquired as to the situation. He faced me with eyes as wide and fearful as Persephone's upon seeing Pluto emerge from the ground full of enraged lust. "It is Livius, Sir," he quavered. "He has returned in the shape of a creature to haunt our walls. Gods help us all, for no living men should see such sights."

Well, you can imagine my surprise upon hearing that: the garrison's vanished tribune returned from the mist a year later as a howling beast? Soldiers are supersti-

tious by nature, it is true, but this was beyond credulity. I took hold of the centurion by his heavy jerkin and fairly shook him. "What are you saying?" I asked him. "What evidence could you have for this outrageous story?"

The old, salted veteran pointed down over the wall. "Look, Sir. See how it wears the purple cape? See how it paces near the gate, as if expecting to be let in? We dare not shoot it with arrows, for it—for *he*—is our commander. Except he is also not. We know not what to do. Please order us!"

Following his finger, I looked down over the wall. Sure enough, the dim luster of a purple tribune's cape glimmered beneath the torch lights over the gate, but I could see nothing underneath it. Only the cape itself stretched out across the cobblestones of the gate bridge like a rich but hasty offering to the temple of Mars. Looking more closely, I could now also see the dull, gold luster of a tribune's armor strewn about on the bridge, as if the poor man had been torn apart by some enemy too vicious to be credited as real. There was, however, no beast in sight, and no further howls echoed up the wall to freeze my blood and tremor my brain.

"I see nothing but clothing," I said. "Get ahold of yourself, Centurion. You set a poor example for your men, blubbing about beasts and missing superiors."

The centurion peered over the wall and then turned back to me with a face full of anger. "But he was there, Sir!" he insisted. "He must only have run off on those awful, hairy legs."

"Oh, I see." Founded as it was upon my own fears, I could not keep the contempt out of my voice. "And he must have left his clothing and armor behind then, or am I misunderstanding?"

The centurion gave me a look of such sullen rage that, for a moment, I feared he might throw me over the wall. "I saw what I saw," he said instead. "We all saw him, Sir, and not a man here would swear to Jove otherwise. If you are so certain that we are wrong, why don't you go down and investigate yourself? That's what you've been sent here to do, is it not? Investigate?"

Now, I could feel the entire garrison turning its fear and anger upon me. Whatever my lofty rank, I was still an outsider, and far from home. We were certainly no longer all Romans together—at least not at this moment—and my personal guard was nowhere in sight.

"That is exactly what I intend to do," I said, "in the morning, when the sun has risen, and clearer thought prevails. In the meantime, let us double the guard on the wall and hope that whatever has visited us under Luna's strange watch does not return. I will be in my chamber if I am needed, though I trust I will not be."

I made a hasty retreat back down the ramparts and away from my erstwhile countrymen. Again, I hope you will not think me weak but rather simply prudent. Armed men with wild fear in their hearts are liable to act rashly, whatever their training.

Fortunately, when I emerged from my room again in the morning (having spent the remainder of the night immersed in agi-

tated dreams of glowing moons and gnashing teeth), it did seem that calm had come with the dawn. I found only the doubled guard on the wall, though these unlucky men did seem fixated on the bridge below. The purple cape was still there, as was the armor, as were some wine dark blood stains on the stones that had not been visible in the darkness.

"It is a sign," one of the guards muttered as I stood next to him looking down upon the bridge in the cold dawn light. "An augur from the gods telling us we do not belong in this vicious country."

"And who are you to interpret such signs," I challenged. "A priest?"

"No, Sir," he said. "Merely one with eyes to see and ears to hear."

"Hear what? I hear nothing."

"Howls, Sir. Howls from Hell itself."

I summoned my personal guard, ordered the gate raised, and went out onto the bridge to inspect the carnage. It was as I had feared—namely, that, aside from the cape, the tribune's armor, and the blood, there was no evidence of whom had committed the crime, or even of what crime, exactly, had been committed. All I had were the gory artifacts of a lost man and the suspect testimony of a pack of fearful soldiers—soldiers whom believed they had witnessed their former commander returned to them as a caped animal by moonlight. I was about to simply order the bridge cleaned and return to my chamber when one of my men, a young but promising eques named Marcellus, called out to me. He was crouching by one of the offering posts on the far

side of the bridge, a small and crudely executed stone statue of Vesta, and pointing into the crook between two of the fingers on one of her suppliant hands. I went to him and was confronted by a ragged tuft of black fur stuck in the crook of her cold digits. Plucking it out, I found it to be coarse and pungent of scent, like the leavings of a dog that had scavenged in the bloody bowls of the coliseum. Except this hair was very long—too long to be credited to any dog I could imagine.

"Did not the Tribune Livius have black hair? Marcellus whispered into the earhole of my helm. "There is a story of him newly painted onto the wall in the fortress dining hall."

"We are Romans," I hissed back. "We are almost all black of hair, at least those of us whom are true of blood."

"Still, does it not seem like a sign?" Marcellus pressed.

"Of what? That a very shaggy dog, or perhaps a very shaggy man, passed this way sometime in the last year? Please. Say nothing of this to the soldiers. It will only further excite their fears, and that is the last thing we need if we are to accomplish our mission."

Oh, you would have been proud of me, my friend. The look I gave my man was one of such stern command that he dropped the subject entirely. Only now do I realize that I might only have succeeded in thwarting myself. But my own story has not yet reached that revelation. First, there is still more to describe.

After ordering the bridge cleaned and

the soiled tribune cape burned in proper offering, I made haste to prepare my journey to the monastery. I could sense as much as see the resentment still simmering in the men around me, as if I had somehow brought evil to their walls. I took all my guard with me, although such a precaution seemed extreme in a vanquished land. But was it truly vanquished? Even I was beginning to wonder, was beginning to look fearfully toward the north.

The monastery was only a morning's journey from the fort. It was not an impressive group of structures, at least not yet, but one could see the ghosts of future imposing arches of stone rising amid the low huts and rough scaffoldings. These Christians are a strange sect, indeed, but it is true that

they seem admirably confident in their future. As it was, I made the barest nod to their looming cross sigil, thinking it unbecoming of an imperial officer to bow too deeply to the symbol of a Palestinian rebel, but also not wanting to be impolite. (Certainly there will always be room for various gods in this empire, and one never knows which ones will strike a popular chord.) The leader of the monastery, an old, densely-bearded man by the name of Cornelius, greeted me with a similarly slight nod as I dismounted. He gestured for his swirling flock of brown-robed, shorn-headed men to stable my party's horses, and they quickly complied. He wore only a bare brown robe himself, but there was something commanding in his countenance that



rivalled the most triumphant gladiator. I must confess, I was briefly intimidated, but I soon recovered myself upon remembering the gravity of my mission.

"I have come to you from Rome at the Emperor's behest," I said to him. "I seek to know the fate of the local legion, the 9th Spanish. It would be unlawful for you to hide any knowledge you have of this matter from me. Do not doubt that I will have you crucified like your criminal forbearers if I find you resistant or withholding. Though I am told some of your sect brazenly crave this fate, trust that I will make it painful enough that you should not."

"Welcome, Sir," Cornelius responded mildly. "Let us speak privately in my chamber. These are not matters fit for discussion under God's holy light."

"Will I have need of my guard?" I said, striving to be as forthright as possible while still wise.

"Only if you need a score of swords to make you feel safe before one, unarmed old man—an unarmed, old man who has foresworn violence along with all other sins of this earth."

Well, you can imagine how I had to respond to that. The two of us proceeded alone to Cornelius' hut. It was a low, grim affair of rough-hewn wood and irregular stone, the whole construction even smaller and more spare than my stark room at the fort. There was not even a window proper, only a small slit in the stone through which a single shaft of cool daylight passed. It was not hard to imagine a deeply humorless man bent in prayer before it, though to

what god or gods a worldly man like myself dare not hazard.

Cornelius settled himself on a rough bench against one wall, and I took up position on a similar bench against the other. The shaft of light continued to fall benignly between us, and he began to speak without any prompting. I have no reason to doubt his belief in what he told me, and I will attempt to reproduce our conversation here. Some of the words may not be exact. These Christians have such a complicated, convoluted way of speaking!

"As to the fate of your lost legion," he began. "Let me first say that I knew some of the men in its ranks. I consider them my brothers, and I broke bread with them in fellowship. You may not think much of such practices, but, I assure you, they mean everything to me and meant much to them as well. Their loss—not their deaths, mind you, but their loss—grieves me deeply, and I pray for their souls at this window often. However, I fear they are past the aid of all but He whom is all powerful. God willing, He will show them His infinite mercy and save them from their horrible fate, for He is the only one whom can do so now."

"Tell me more," I said, "and speak plainly. I have no time for, nor interest in, your sect's peculiar philosophies."

"Very well. Then I will speak in the only language that one like you can understand—that of a man of the world."

"Then speak already. I will brook no more prevaricating from a man in a sackcloth."

"Your men are not dead. Rather, they

are in a state worse than death. They have spent the last year wondering the earth naked to the cold, living no better than wild men in caves—except without the benefit of the caves. They pass each other in the northern mist, not knowing the names of their fellows or even their own, let alone where they came from or how they came to such a pass. This state is so terrible that their souls have fled, though their mortal bodies carry on, lost, cold, and hungry—lost, cold, and forgotten, even by themselves. And, if this was not enough, they suffer a hideous transformation once every double fortnight. That is when the moon reaches its zenith and shines the full power of its she-wolf eye for three nights to raise sin in men’s hearts. During this fell time, they are transfigured into hideous beasts filled with nothing but rage and ravenous hunger. Lupusse you might call them, though that is a slander against the natural creatures that bear that name. They are mindless in this form—at least I believe this to be so—and will fall upon anyone un-blessed enough to cross their path. In truth, such men—if you can call them men—have always existed to the north of this land. They are outcasts, the remnant of a cursed people who coveted the fields of their neighbors and were thus punished by a just and awe-full God. They are, in other words, the dark and hirsute descendants of Cane himself, and the people here have long feared them by many different names. What is less known is that they serve a purpose, as all things do in His perfect creation. Namely, they are here to punish us when

we grow too covetous, when we grow too prideful and forget that all that we see, taste, and touch on this earth will soon pass to dust. So now I ask you, Roman, do you know of any people whom might have offended the Lord God in this way? Do you know of any men whom covet land and murder their neighbors to such an extent that the blood of their victims might cry out to the highest of high thrones? Because I think you do, and I think your fellows met the fate that awaits all men who behave as such in this corner of the world. However, I do not presume to judge, only to share what I know and believe. May God help me, and may God help you also.”

He leaned back on his bench then as if spent from the effort of this confounding speech. I was left to parse it in the heavy silence that followed. Naked, soul-less men wandering in the mist for a year, unaware of their own past and subject to transformation into beasts every double fortnight? I was, to say the least, skeptical. On the other hand, I had no better information to work from, and there was no doubting that Cornelius, for all his eccentricity, seemed like a learned man. It seemed best to ignore his implied treasonous accusation for the moment in the pursuit of more clarity.

“Let us be direct then,” I said. “You are telling me that an entire legion of Roman soldiers, at least 5,000 infantry and auxilia, marched north of here, were fallen upon by some kind of cursed tribe of monsters, were killed, and then—to borrow a term—resurrected into monsters themselves? I’m sure you will forgive my skepticism. I have trav-

eled widely in this world and seen many things, but never have I heard a story, much less witnessed such horrors, as you describe."

Cornelius regarded me solemnly from his bench. He had the eyes of an old senator—slow, cagey, and rather brutal. "And yet your own fortress was visited by just such a creature last eve—and on the first night of the full moon, no less," he said. "Your men saw it—saw him—and knew him for whom he was. I, too, knew Livius. He was a strong and just man, as men of the world go. It does not surprise me that he was able to transcend his fall enough to attempt a return to the living. He was not successful, of course. God's will cannot be thwarted, but perhaps he was meant to come as a warning, a message to you and yours to leave this land and return to where you belong."

"I am sure you would like nothing better," I said, testing him.

"I care not one way or another, as I am not your judge. Only your mortal brother who wishes you the peace of true fellowship."

"In your criminal messiah?"

"Yes. Although those are your words, not mine."

We regarded each other across another heavy silence, and I confess, I was somewhat unbalanced by his odd speech and grave manner. That written, I also had more than a little desire to make a martyr out of him, if only to reassert the imperial prerogative. In the end, I acted on neither impulse, and instead tried to leave him with an

impression of me as a man of practical strength.

"A fine story," I said. "But I am quite certain that the men of the Spanish 9th are no more or no less dead than all the others whom have crossed the Styx before them—"

"Not dead," Cornelius broke in. "Transformed."

"No. Dead. And I would thank you not to spread such tales among the local populace, much less among the soldiers of the garrison. Clearly, your bizarre beliefs have infected some of them, and, as much as it pains me to say, their loyalty is now in question. You seem to have eyes and ears behind the walls."

"The only true loyalty is loyalty to—"

"God, I'm sure. Or your savior of choice. Or a hissing Egyptian snake idol for all I care. Just keep your gods-be-damned monster stories to yourself, and we will have no trouble, Old Man."

"Very well. But know that you leave this little encampment of God's kingdom on earth un-blessed."

"I have never been blessed," I said, "and always proud of it."

I left that upsetting old man's room abruptly and ordered my guard mounted. The brown-robed men complied, but it did not escape my notice that some of my centurions had been conversing with them earnestly. Jove-knows what peculiar ideas are now bubbling under their helms. Fortunately, whatever persuasive rhetoric was at work was likely countered by the sight of a row of ramshackle stone tombs lined up just beyond the monastery's gate.

They were so pathetic as to have gone unnoticed on our arrival, but now the cries of the poor, still-living souls bricked up in them seeped out to us, pleading for rescue. "Anchorites," Marcellus muttered as we rode away. "The Christians wall them up to starve as they pray out their final days. Apparently, this pleases their barbarian of a god."

As I mentioned, Marcellus is a good man.

We did not reach the fort until dusk, and a second full moon was already rising as we rode over the bridge and through the gate. It was clear upon our arrival that much had been done to secure the walls against an enemy, and, despite my having given no orders to this effect, something proud stirred in me to see the industrious lengths to which these few, stranded legionnaires had gone. Bolt launchers now bristled from the ramparts next to a number of small catapults. Hot pots of oil simmered over low flames above the bridge. Every window had been stoned up except for a narrow arrowslit embrasure that would have pleased Archimedes, and not five feet of wall went unmanned by a soldier in full battle plume.

Livius trained them well, I thought. And then—because I could not help thinking it—But what side of the battle will he be on tonight?

Before I could dismount, I was approached by that same, hoary centurion who had nearly thrown me off the ramparts the night before.

"Welcome back, Sir," he said. "Night is

falling, and it is best that you are behind the walls. We have dispatched a brave rider to the village to request aid, but we have little hope it will come or that he will return. In the meantime, you see we have done what we can to prepare for an assault. You are welcome to review our preparations."

"I can see what you have done," I said, trying to betray neither the pride nor fear I was feeling. "I am sorry to say it will all be for naught, as there is no enemy at our gate, a fact you and every man here seems to have ignored."

"Best to be prepared, Sir."

I chose to ignore the insolence with which he voiced my honorific.

Night fell, and the moon arced over without any sign of attack. Only the mist pressed in, cold and thick as ever. Near midnight, I retired to my chamber, feeling I had shown more than enough care for the men's superstitious fears. In truth, I had more than a few fears of my own, and not all of them centered on the possibility of dead men transformed into savage beasts. Cornelius had been persuasive, and something he had said: the idea that Livius—or whatever Livius might have become—had returned almost a year to the day from his disappearance as a sign for me was troubling. I do not mean to be vain. I do not believe myself worthy of the gods' augurs. And yet there could be no denying that that tribune's bloody cape had materialized on the bridge only the night before, and that this terrible occurrence had come right on the heels of my arrival. No wonder the men here distrusted me. If something more were

to occur, something worse, my safety might be in jeopardy, and I felt it incumbent to begin my report to you in case it should become my last testament.

I had just lit my lamp to begin writing when the first howl sounded. It chilled my neck even as I hunched under the low flame over this parchment, as if that part of me already knew that a fell hour had arrived. It was shortly accompanied by a second howl, then a third, then a whole chorus of shrieking calls that iced my blood. For a moment, I sat frozen in my chair, quill in hand, as if my stillness might somehow save me from the wicked come-hithers sounding from beyond the walls. It did not, and shortly I heard armored limbs running along the wall again. Soon, the Barritus began to erupt from our men's ranks, that most throaty battle cry intended to strike fear in the hearts of all Rome's enemies. But, I must confess, it sounded more like the pitiful murmuring of a bag of kittens compared to the lupin-throated horde calling back. My door burst open, and Marcellus stumbled into my room, wide-eyed and half-dressed.

"Sir," he gasped. "The 9th has returned en masse. But it is changed! Awfully changed!"

The gaping fear shining through his normally steady face was enough to raise me from my seat.

"Armor me, Man," I said. "We will face this threat, whatever it may be, as we face all threats—with iron logic and steady resolve."

"But, Sir! They are....they have

become..."

"Steady. My armor, and then to the wall."

But what words are left to me to describe what I saw next? Like all experienced military men, I know you have heard the stories of the Teutoburg humiliation, of how swarms of barbaric tribesmen converged upon our legions in a dark wood and broke their discipline, of how that cursed day ended in a bloody parade of savages sporting Roman helmets and Roman arms as trophies (even as they wore Roman fingers and Roman teeth on dripping cords around their necks). Imagine such a scene as that, but with those gruesomely bedecked savages replaced by gigantic, upright dogs—all black of fur, white of fang, and red of eye, the last reflecting the torchlights on the wall back up to the terrified men upon it like a vast shower of embers from Hell. This terrible company swirled around the fortress base with no seeming order among them other than a desire to spring up and consume our flesh. The only communication they seemed capable of were those cruel howls, full-throated wolf screams emanating up from foul throats to shudder the stars. Yet, here and there, one could see the tattered remains of red tunics and brown jerkins among those powerful lupin limbs. A few even still wore bronze helmets around their frothing, snarling jaws. Did I mention they all had the rubiginous eyes of rabid, mindless curs? I think I did. Bear in mind, I scribble these horrors with a quick and trembling nib.

I stood on the wall, shoulder to shoul-

der with the men of the garrison, watching this devilish orgy churn below. I knew not what to say. There seemed to be nothing to say, nothing but to stand with as stern of jaw as possible while struggling to hold in one's urine. Some of the men standing beside me, veteran salts all, failed in doing even this. One by one, they cowered away from the parapets like beaten whelps. Suffice to say, not a bolt was fired, an arrow drawn, a bucket of oil dropped. Only Marcellus and I stood firm, and I suspect even he was no longer present in his mind in the way a man can run mentally from a terror without moving his feet.

For our relative bravery, we were only rewarded with the best view of what occurred next. I hesitate not in saying that it was the most harrowing vision of all.

A howl more piercing than any that had come before broke over the melee below. As if upon the clear tone of a battle trumpet, all the beasts stopped in their places. Then they quickly drew up into two rectangular formations of roughly a thousand each. (I cannot give a firmer count as I was witnessing this all by torchlight through fearful, squinting eyes.) They left a clear isle about twenty feet wide down their center, and it was down this freakish corridor that the largest beast of all approached the gate. The brute was massive, black as Cerberus's hide, and possessed of eyes like flaming rubies. Its hulking white fangs protruded from a spittled and blood-flecked jaw, and in them it carried something large that dully reflected the moonlight. I am not ashamed to say that even I drew back before

its approach, my sandaled feet creeping backwards along the ramparts, as if the creature might, with a single spring, have cleared the battlements before me and sunk those titanic fangs into my throat. However, it only approached calmly between the comparative silence of its subservient ranks. Only those creatures' many panting breaths broke the quiet as they steamed up into the night like a host of fluttering, sylvan plumes.

When the great beast reached the bridge below, it stopped next to that same humble statue of Vesta and laid its cargo upon the cobblestones. Our torches and oil fires were bright enough at this distance to fully light the object it had brought forth, and there was no denying what it was in all of its fallen magnificence.

It was the eagle of the 9th—raggedly gnawed from its wooden staff, but whole.

The beast looked silently up at me with the eagle lying between its hulking paws, and it was then that I saw the adornment around its hirsute neck: a silver tribune's chain matted and snarled into a massive chest of black fur. Against that fearsome backdrop, the chain looked no larger or heavier than a light bracelet twined on a skinny girl's wrist.

"Livius," I whispered too quietly for anyone but myself to hear. But the huge, dark spear blades of the thing's ears quivered, and I was reminded of a well-trained hunting dog hearing the moan of a cornered fox.

"Livius," I said more boldly. "I see you have returned with your...men. I trust, even

now, that you have not forgotten your allegiance to the Emperor and to all those whom serve him.”

The monster cocked its heavy, grotesque head to the side and regarded me with smoldering eyes.

“That is, I trust you will leave these walls and this land in peace,” I pressed on. “The oaths you have sworn demand no less, for this is Roman land, and you, a Roman, cannot also be Rome’s enemy.”

My words echoed for a long time in the darkness. Distantly, I heard the murmurs and shufflings of the men cowering behind me. There was no movement across the dark plain below, only that same hissing breath and a terrible gravity of stilled rage.

“Livius,” I said yet again. “Withdraw your forces and return to the north. We will not trouble you, and you may consider this your last and most honored service to the Emperor your God.”

The beast regarded me for one final, heart-seizing moment. Then it sunk its great head, took up the eagle in its jaws, and gnashed it in half. A bronze wing fell to either side of its bloody, frothing mouth. That same mouth raised itself to a black heaven and howled a howl that shook the stones beneath my feet, a howl that shook the very earth itself. In response, the horde behind it surged forward as one growling, mad wave and fell upon what remained of its former standard. What was left of the eagle disappeared into that seething, black mass of fur, claws, and teeth. And, just as quickly, that mass withdrew in the form of thousands of wolf limbs receding back into

the darkness. They left only a trampled and misty plain below.

I pause here to allow the weight of what I have reported to sink home.

...But alas, not for long. Though no more of Livius’ cursed 9th were seen that night, last night, the men of this garrison have determined that I must leave their company. Not only that, they have decided that I, as a symbol of a distant and uncaring empire; I, who seemingly brought the curse of their lost compatriots back upon them; must travel north, alone, and recover whatever is left of the eagle myself. They plan to accompany me only as far as to where the fog grows thick. Then they will force me to walk further at arrow point. If I return without the remains of the eagle and a promise of peace with our new lupus inimicus, they have vowed to crucify me. In this way, I am to be made an offering—one of great weight, they hope, though they are as unsure of its reception as I am unhopeful for my survival. Tonight will bring yet another full moon.

It was only with great pleading that I convinced them to first let me write this letter to you and to allow Marcellus to carry it south. As I stated at the outset, I do not know if it will ever reach you, but, if it should, I beg of you, as one honorable Roman to another, to impress upon the Emperor the necessity of building great fortifications along this border. Perhaps even a manned wall that runs its entire length and bisects this cursed isle into a land of peace below and a kingdom of horror above.

Consider this the last, desperate request of one whom has always striven to do his duty. Otherwise, I fear not only for the empire's prospects, but for all of civilized mankind.

Ah, but now the dawn breaks, and my erstwhile compatriots are knocking at my door. It is time for me to go north, to disappear into the mist, to meet whatever fate awaits a humble servant of the Emperor

such as myself...

May the gods, or God (or whatever heavenly forces reign above) receive me in an upright and manly form. ❖

END TRANSMISSION