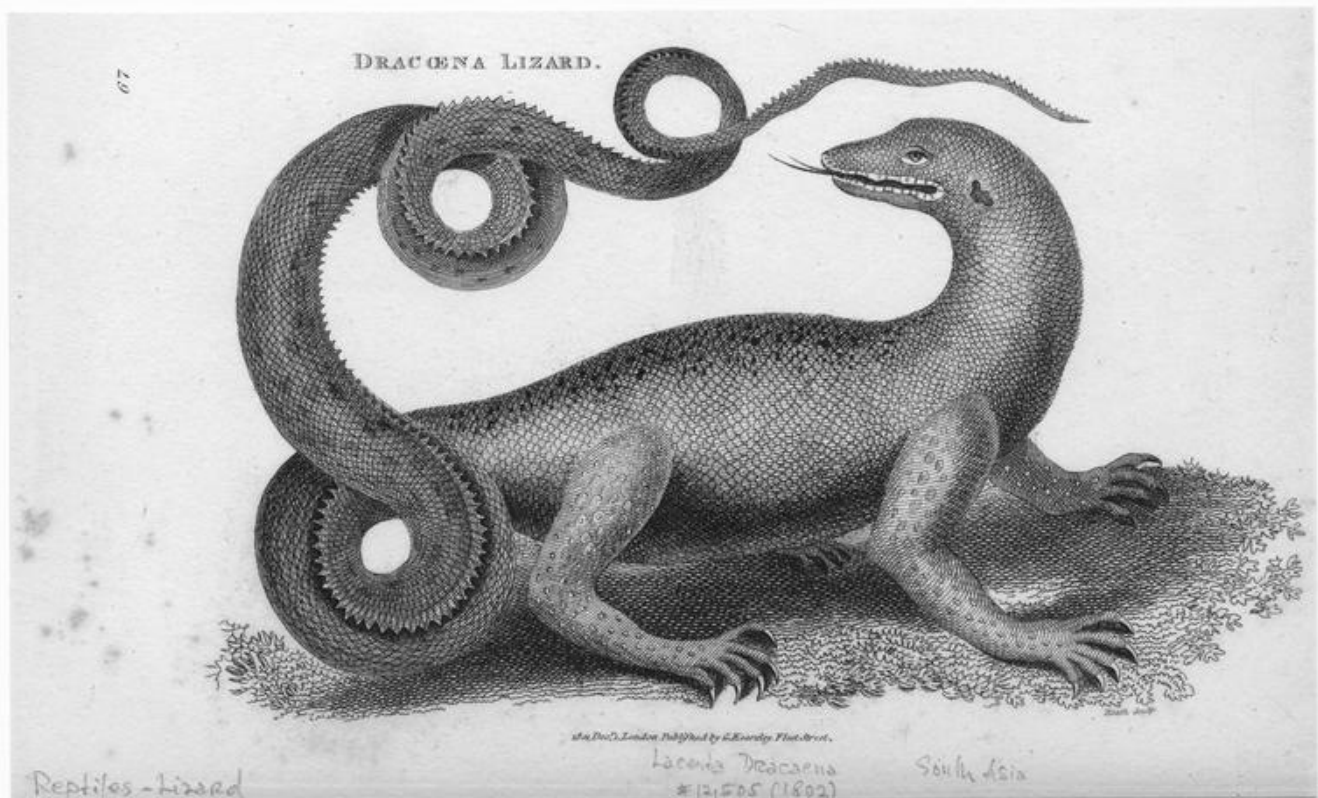


# Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – SAVING THE SCAPEGOAT by Jenean McBrearty. Ms McBrearty is a graduate of San Diego State University, who taught Political Science and Sociology. Her fiction, poetry, and photographs have been published in over a hundred and eighty print and on-line journals. She won the Eastern Kentucky English Department Award for Graduate Creative Non-fiction in 2011, and a Silver Pen Award in 2015 for her noir short story: Red's Not Your Color. Her novels and collections can be found on Amazon and Lulu.com.

Page 12 – THE FALL OF THE BLACK VULTURE GANG AT THE HANDS OF THE SORCERER CALLED BENEDICTUS by Cam Rhys Lay. Mr. Lay received his MFA in Fiction Writing from the University of Kansas. His fiction has appeared in *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*, *Eclectica Magazine*, *The Society for Misfit Stories* and more. He currently lives in Brooklyn, NY, where he runs marketing for an online education startup and is finishing up his forthcoming novel, *The Childless Ones*, which is partially set in the same world as the story published here. To learn more about his work, go to [www.camrhyslay.com](http://www.camrhyslay.com).



# “SAVING THE SCAPEGOAT”

by JENEAN MCBREARTY

I didn't mean to intrude on the Federation neighborhood. I blame it on the foggy mist that rolled in the way it does in San Diego; it settled in the El Cajon valley obscuring the path from down Mt. Helix where I'd gone to remember the cross that once stood there. The only thing left is the granite slab that held it strong against the wind and I sat there for at least a half an hour. Then I started back down the foot hill, and heard voices speaking Cybelese, the Federation dialect.

I hid myself behind a dirty white pickup truck outside the perimeter of men seated on the ground, all laughing at male children--from four to ten, I guessed--who were playing with some goats. In the center of the circle was a fire pit with a roasting spit. Letting the children play with their dinner like a cats toying with mice, I thought, and turned to sneak away. But, the squeals of the goats got my attention and I watched as the children began hitting the goats, encouraged by the men, they wrestled them to the ground and hit them again and again, then choking them, letting them go and grabbing them by the legs as they tried to escape.

Finally, the goats, their necks broken by the twisting the older boys gave them as the

younger boys held them still, stopped their plaintive cries. One of the men stood up and began yelling in Cybelese. I only recognized two words: Avay Awahid. Praise the Leader. And another man entered the ring, leading four young girls tied together by a rope around their necks. There was much shouting and with the noise covering the sounds of my footfalls, I ran like I was being chased.

I was on the top of the mountain before I stopped and washed my eyes with canteen water. It was a ritual I would engage in for weeks, trying to cleanse from my mind the cruelty I'd seen. I told myself they really wouldn't kill the girls as they'd killed the goats, but I know better; their celebrations were allowed in their neighborhood no matter how grotesque. Everything was allowed. Rape, stoning, immolation of the living, drowning, beating, mutilation... at the time of the Sporos life-craft crash, our teachers called it galactic tolerance.

“Captain James,” Lt. Michael Franks said. “You haven't touched your food. How do you expect to fight a battle with no energy?”

“This is a battle I've been preparing for all my life, Lieutenant. I've enough energy

left to fight ten battles.”

“But to stay up all night praying? What good does it do?”

“It’s called a vigil.” Cpt. James put on his helmet, armor, and the white tunic emblazoned with the red cross over it. He wanted the Federation soldiers to see he was a soldier for Ault Regnum...the Old Regime. Those who surrendered would be executed in the name of the King of Justice. They were the last words they would hear before a firing squad cut them down. And they would be counted. Everybody marked with a number.

“The government calls you a vigilante, Sir. We do have orders to cease hostilities.”

Captain James checked his clip to make sure it was full and locked it into place. “Do you believe this enemy will cease hostility just because someone in D.C. signs a worthless piece of paper?”

“If I believed that, I wouldn’t be here and none of the other men would be either.”

The fifty men, two men to an armored truck, revved their motors, and drove out Highway 8 to El Cajon. It was a road littered with garbage, old clothes, abandoned weapons and crippled vehicles: the remnants of six months of civil war between Federation and the Old Regime that was suppressed by National Guard. Many Guard units had refused the truce when they saw how Federation soldiers raped and

butchered their enemies. It was clear the Old Regime forces were defending themselves and their property. The last straw was the rape of a five-year-old boy not twenty minutes after the Old Regime forces put down their arms.

Capt. James had held the sedated child in his arms, and vowed justice for Bobby Wheeler. He and his men were called the Renegade Brigade, and within the week, twenty-five more men had joined them.

The twenty trucks, followed by five A1 Abrams, rolled into El Cajon, the familiar acrid odor of decaying bodies and burning flesh filling their nostrils as they drove close to their target: the Federation Meeting House. It was Friday, and the entire neighborhood was inside, separated by age and sex to learn the tenets of Federation governance. “We have the meeting house surrounded, Captain,” Lt. Franks whispered into his transmitter.

“Secure the doors, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Two SMAW-Ds fired just short of the doors, leaving the steps a pile of rubble that made escape almost impossible. As the panic-stricken “Feddies” fought to get out of the building, the M2 machine guns unleashed their payloads, the mass of bodies making the barrier more secure. Eventually, the people stopped coming.

“Get ready for return fire, men,”

Franks yelled. The trucks backed away and fired more RPG into the building. The roof caved on the left side, and as the Feddies attempted to dig out from under it, the soldiers drew nearer and guarded the crumbled wall with their M19s.

A bullet bounced off Franks' helmet, and he fired an RPG in the direction of fire. "Bring in the tanks, Captain," Franks radioed. "We're ready to lower the boom."

The Abrams drove into position with the trucks parked behind them, and fired their 120mm smoothbore cannons at the hole, reducing the meeting house to rubble. Captain James gave the cease firing order and climbed out of one of the tanks. He listened to the goats screaming with pain and fear.

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The raid lasted a half an hour. The two other mosques in the city would be mobilized for an attack, but it wouldn't come tonight. The Feddies wouldn't know when the Renegade Brigade would strike again. Only James knew. But it would come again, and the next time there would be a hundred men, and ten tanks.

"I gave the cease fire order as General Sage instructed," James said in his report.

"Then how the hell did the mosque get taken out, Captain?" General Sage shot back. "The federation leaders are outraged and vow to take retribution on the Mount Helix Renegade Brigade. How are we going

to restore community relations if these vigilantes can't be stopped?"

"We're so close to the border, Sir. I think it's the Cartels. They want to run their drugs and the Federationistas want to run theirs, and they fight. What can I say?"

"You can say where they got the kind of fire power to demolish a mosque in thirty minutes, that's what you can say. There were two hundred and twenty people killed in that senate...meeting house, indoctrination school...whatever I'm supposed to call it... the entire body politic."

"Yes, Sir, I understand. Do you want me to do reconnaissance in Mexico?" James doodled a star and a crescent moon on a note pad, then drew an "X" over it.

"Hell no! The Mexican government will be all into our shit! I want you to catch these KKK freaks by whatever means necessary."

"Yes, Sir." Franks entered and gave him a quick salute. "Sorry, Sir, I have to go. My Lieutenant is here. Could be good news."

"Keep me in the loop."

James hung up and Franks approached the desk. "We caught a Feddie girl in the mess hall. She's at the dispensary."

"Was she wired?"

"No, she's recovering from a FGM, and begging for protection."

James grabbed his hat. "Let's go."

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Twelve-year-old Lilliani said she was mutilated ten days before the attack on the El Cajon Meeting Mouse. She was given time to recover and had only bread, water, and fruit during her convalescence, according to Shelby, the interpreter.

“What’d the doctor say?” Capt. James said to Franks.

“He says she’s okay. No infection yet, but she’s weak. He gave her a B-12 shot and a bowl of beef stew.”

She stared at James and wrapped the cotton blanket around herself tight. Was he so intimidating?

“What’ll we do with her, Sir? Franks asked.

“Ask her where her parents are,” James instructed the medic.

“She says they’re dead,”

The girl sank to her knees in front of James, looked up at him, and folded her hands as if in prayer. “Americana,” she said.

The medic continued. “She says she wants to join the Old Regime. I don’t know what to make of it, Sir. You suppose she was converted?”

“By who? The tooth fairy? Put her back in the chair. I want to interrogate her.”



Shelby told her to sit in the chair and she obeyed, sitting still as a stone.

“Ask her, who is George Washington?” James said.

The medic listened to her answer, and said, “She’s the fourth wife of Ali Assar. She lost a baby last year and Ali was going to beat her, but a soldier stopped him. A soldier in an Old Regime uniform. He told her the Old Regime would protect her and left. Ali beat her then.”

Big tears streaked down her face, and James gave her Kleenex.

“If she got through our perimeter, she can get out and get back. Put her in the stockade with a 24/7 guard and make sure she gets all the food she wants. From the looks of her, she’s been starved.”

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I didn’t expect deserters, least of all a child bride of a savage who may or may not be dead. And who may or may not be looking for her. The doctor confirmed she’d had a pregnancy. We couldn’t verify if the child was alive or dead either. She said it was a boy. It was believable. Losing a son would incur a beating. Could traumas like that cause her to seek sanctuary with the enemy?

I told Franks to find the soldier who’d tried to intervene. It was almost an impossible order. Old Regime soldiers could be disciplined for interfering with Federation communities. Still, I figured it might be a

Renegade, and anyone who joined up with us was willing to disobey any government order, and two days later, Franks brought Lance Corporal Byers to my office. “Do you recognize her?” I asked him.

“How can I? She was covered up from head to toe. But I can verify the incident; I did tell the son-of-a-bitch to leave a woman alone and I did tell her we’d protect her.”

“You speak Cybelese?”

“Just what I’ve picked up over the years.”

I knew immediately Byers was not only brave, he was smart. I couldn’t understand more than a few words of the language, much less learn it. “How the hell did you survive the encounter?”

“I was carrying an M16 A4 and he was carrying a leather strap.”

There was no way to verify the identity of the run-a-way. My policy was to kill any Feddie we saw, and this girl was a Feddie. Perhaps one of the rope yoked girls led into the ring of hell. What test could I devise to justify the risk to my men’s safety? I’d seen four-year-olds as vicious as any forty-year-old. Women were as lethal as any male Feddie. Perhaps they preferred the hereafter to the subjugation they suffered in this one. On the other hand, no goat ever detonated an explosive vest.

With the access to a Stealth 22 fighter jet and a B-2 bomber, the fate of the two remaining mosques in El Cajon was sealed.

Major Fremont was the first pilot to join the Renegade Brigade, and the first to bring news from the outside since the official cease fire. The government shut down the internet, issued a news black-out on TV, and cell phones were only operable for ranks of Major and above. Fremont was stationed at the Miramar Naval Air Station, allegedly flew out on a routine coast patrol, and crashed into the ocean.

“They’re still in search and rescue mode,” he said. “While I was flying, I hacked a secure transmission from San Onofre nuke facility, and heard there’s a secret group called the Knights of Malta in Dearborn Michigan. That’s when I decided it was time to join you. The plane’s in a Harbison Auxiliary Airstrip hangar.”

“What are conditions in Dearborn?” Charles said.

“Remember, there are over two and a half million Feddies there, so the campaign has to be on a grand scale,” Fremont said. “They mostly go on random night raids under the pretext of patrolling for looters. The plan is to wait for missiles to arrive from Moscow.”

“Breshnova is on board?” James headed for his liquor stash. If the American Old Regime was finally getting military aid, it was time to celebrate with something stronger than beer. He brought out a bottle of Riesling wine and rustled up three glasses.

“That’s just the Russians. The Poles,

Czechs, Albanians and Hungarians are forming their own militias.”

“What about NATO?” Franks said.

“Disintegrating. Too many defections.”

James emptied the bottle and handed out glasses. “Do you want to take command of the Renegades, Major?” He desperately hoped to be relieved.

“It’s your rodeo, Capt. James. You developed the template, and you know Southern California better than I do.” He unpinned his insignia and handed them to James. “Want to trade?”

They made the swap, and James laid out a map on his make-shift desk. Zero hour for the Alpha and Gamma Meeting Houses was 1600 on Friday the thirteenth. Their intel was they that the Alpha demolition had made it clear to the Feddies that the government could not protect the El Cajon Federation colony; they were stockpiling weapons in the meeting houses and were negotiating with the Cartels for RPGs and 81 mortars.

James unrolled two drawings of the mosques marked with X’s where the weapons were being stored. “Hit those marks and the meeting house become one big self-contained bomb, gentlemen,” James said. “Think you can do that, Fremont?”

“They’re not expecting precision from above. I’ll take ‘am out. Leave the clean-up to you.”

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Why me? I wondered as I stared at the ceiling of my tent. When I was a kid, it was hip to root for the bad guys. Americans love an under-dog. I didn't. I loved the champions who were first out of the gate and stayed in the lead until every last bastard got his comeuppance. No, making the decision to bomb the meeting houses wasn't keeping me awake. It was Lilliani. The little girl with the sewn-up vagina that some fifty-year-old Freddie would hide away to hide his own depravity.

If she was going to be executed, having spoken the name of America and begged for sanctuary, he couldn't order some grunt to do it. My soul was already burdened with the blood of a thousand anonymous aliens; because I didn't know if they were really people or some sort of outer space animal, it was impossible to believe they could multiply so quickly. But if I killed Lilliani, I'd be seeing the wild desperation in her large black eyes for the rest of eternity.

She has to go back, I told myself. Maybe a prisoner exchange at the end of hostilities. But, who was I kidding? There would be no end to hostilities until every Freddie was dead, dying, or doing time in a prison cell. There could be no prisoner exchange because there wouldn't be any prisoners; they killed every prisoner they captured. Anyway, what would she go back to? Certainly not loving parents. Maybe an American church would take her. If she

blew the Catholics up, there'd be no hard feelings. The Pope would declare everyone a saint, and they'd soldier on.

Franks came by and confessed to the same consternation. "The Doc fixed her up. She got an infection...maybe from us? Anyway, she needed anti-biotics bad. Now what?"

I didn't have an answer. "You got kids, Franks?"

"No. Me and my wife were good citizens. Didn't want to overload the planet. We put off a lot of things while the Freddie's were popping them out like gum-ball machines; couldn't afford a house so we rented, drove a ten-year-old car, recycled everything but poop...and then finally poop when the city sewer lines were bombed."

Franks was the only soldier I knew who said poop when he wasn't mad. "How'd you like to adopt a twelve-year-old?"

"Oh no, not me. I'd be scared every night of my life wondering when she'd turn on us. Call me a coward, but there's something about throats and knives that makes me cringe."

"That's just what I was doing before you came in. Cringing. Can the Doc tell how old she is for sure?"

"Wha'dya mean?"

"I don't know that much about alien girls' private parts. You know a boy's age range by whether his nuts have dropped,



you know? But the Feddies hack up females at every age for every goddamned reason they can think of. Maybe Lilliani's twelve, but maybe she's sixteen and a spy. If there was a way we could tell...don't they mutilate before the girl gets pregnant?"

"Like these dogs have rules?"

"Yeah, I know. It's hard for me to fathom, too. But child murder isn't one of my areas of expertise." Frank's fingers spidered through his hair. It's his own way of concentrating, I think, so I let my thoughts traverse the problem too. I pulled my pistol out of its holster and checked the clip.

Frank must have thought I'd made up my mind because he looked up quick, and said, "Wait. I got an idea. You ever read any history?"

"A little. Why?"

"We should do it the old fashion way. Random. We take six rifles, five blanks, one bullet, have somebody mix up the guns, we each take a rifle, and aim. Nobody knows which rifle fires the death bullet."

It seemed cumbersome, but psychologically sound. "I suppose we could choose the six men by random, too. That way no one has to volunteer. They're just carrying out orders." We locked eyes. "Okay, so we're cowards at heart. Good for us. We don't want to kill this girl. But we never wanted to kill any Feddies, and where did that get us? Here. They want to kill us, and there's no way out except to kill them first."

Franks grabbed the chain he wore around his neck and kissed the medallion. "You know what this is?"

"The medal of Saint Get-us-off-the-hook, I hope."

"Nope. It's a quarter my Great-grandfather found at the World Trade Center. He was sixteen that day. Some firefighter gave his life for me, he'd say. He got out of the building, and when he was crossing the street, a woman's purse hit the ground, and cracked open like a watermelon. In her change purse was four quarters. He gave each of his kids one of them, and my Dad gave his to me." His eyes were the saddest I've ever seen. He reached for my pistol. "I'll do it. For a firefighter and a lady who lost her purse. Don't worry, the Doc gave her plenty of pain killers."

It didn't seem right. Lilliani wasn't in New York in 2001. None of the Feddies were. Their ship was in trouble and we helped out, thinking at last Star Trek and a solar federation was possible. We welcomed them as the answer to all our petty squabbles. We're all brothers, we told ourselves. Now, we had to fight children when we could have destroyed men and saved little girls and goats from torture. I held fast to my pistol. "You stay here, and pray for me, Franks. Better she be dead, then I be wrong."

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The B-2 had Batman stenciled on the nose. "That's my baby," Fremont said, "and

she's loaded with two MOABs. El Cajon Valley will be El Cajon Canyon by this time tomorrow." He climbed the ladder and got into the cockpit. "Want to hear the news?"

"You're getting something?" Capt. James scrambled up after him.

*This morning North Korea launched long-range low-grade nuclear missiles that hit Seoul at two A.M. and Tokyo at two-twenty A.M., according to the U.S.S. Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier monitoring system. In response, the President gave orders for the carrier to carry out defensive attacks on Pyongyang, although Beijing had asked for a damage assessment before the strike. In other news, over two-hundred thousand Federationistas were killed when the Far-right group, known as the Weisspunkt, set off high-powered explosives in Frankfurt, Germany. As many as fifteen blasts were heard throughout the night, as First Responders were overwhelmed by the carnage, as well as the singing of the German anthem. The United Nations Security Council has called an emergency meeting and condemned the attacks as violations of international law. Weisspunkt released the following message in response: Sieg Heil.*

*This broadcast will repeat in Spanish.*

"Get in, James," Fremont directed. "It's our turn."

"You mean it? Now? What about Friday the thirteenth?"

"Like Machiavelli said, punishment must be swift, certain, and lethal to be

effective."

Fifteen minutes later, the hangar door was open, and the B-2, AV 9 Spirit of California rolled onto the tarmac. Sixty-nine feet long, and one hundred-seventy-two feet wide, and carrying a payload of sixteen, two-thousand-pound bombs, it was a machine the Feddies would never see or hear.

They dropped two computer guided bombs into the front doors of the mosques, and the intel was right, according to the news reports. The Feddie's explosive stash, though hardly detectable, was destroyed. From atop Mt. Helix, the Valley was one big fire pit. Perhaps, James thought, Lilliani was lucky.

When James returned to the Mt. Helix compound, Lt. Franks was hard pressed to maintain his military demeanor as he explained the frenetic activity swirling around them. "Radioman Halter reports news of the airstrike is all over the ham radios and got through to the local militias. They know we got game in the air and started lining up. All two hundred of them. Recruits, but damn! These guys are ready, James. We're trying to scrounge up uniforms for them."

"Uniforms?"

"We've got an army. What did you expect would happen when you wiped out the headquarters of the Federation threat in San Diego County? The government's on its way and they're here to protect you."

"I thought we'd have plausible deniability...seriously, Franks, Fremont has gone to ground in Descanso and I have an alibi: you. How the hell are we going to feed two hundred and twenty-five men? And house them?"

"Yeah, there's logistical problems, but we need fighters. As we speak, four platoons are already headed into the valley of death to neutralize what remains of resistance...and fight their way to Walmart and bring back supplies."

James sank down on his cot. "Four platoons?"

Franks fired up the hot plate to boil coffee water. "Militias from Bonita, Santee, Descanso, and Harbison Canyon. Don't try sending them home. One guy made a sign to hang above the mess tent: Valley Forge."

The Pentagon did send a delegation to the compound. No retro-Clive Bundy antics, just two armored SUVs escorting Colonel Calhoun's limousine. I told him I'd sent a recon unit to ground zero and congratulated him on the air-strike. As soon as they reported anything, I'd forward intel but it'd take a while without phone or internet service. He gave me a cell phone with a reserved line to General Sage. I considered it a condescending gesture, but Halter yelled *alleluia!*

"I can hack the line, clone it, and we'll be in the communications business," he told me, and grabbed the cell phone before I could get my finger prints on it.

"Work your magic, Sergeant," I said, and me and Franks headed down the mountain to make our own survey of the situation. The meeting houses looked like the pictures I'd seen of the bombed buildings on the History Channel videos. Just piles of rubble surrounded by apartment buildings pocked by bullets and grenade holes, and littered streets. Broken glass, overturned vehicles, and burning dumpsters; evidence of looting was everywhere. What the bomb concussion didn't destroy, the rioting finished off.

"It's so quiet," Franks said. "No outside markets. No celebrations. No parading on public streets."

And no buses coughing carbon. No children's voices. Only the distant staccato of machine gun fire. On day four since the bombing there was only sporadic engagement near the eastern perimeter of the city.

But...where were the survivors?

As we approached the shopping mall, we smelled the faint odor of garbage; by the time we reached the parking lot, we were choking on a stench that plaster and concrete couldn't contain. The Cineplex marquee explained it all: El Cajon---A Freddie-Free City. Those who couldn't flee, were dead inside one of America's late, great monument to commerce.

We didn't discuss the realities of our war. Large populations meant fewer prisoners could be accommodated, especially when they weren't used to manual labor to

produce their own food. It took too much time to teach people to be productive, yet, they'd starve if we repatriated them to Planet Sporos. "Our problem? Our solution," Lt. Franks said as we watched busloads of Feddies drive into the mall parking lot. "If the government hadn't let them in, we wouldn't have to figure a way to get them out."

He was right, of course. Bad decisions have bad consequences. There were no non-combatants in Feddie enclaves.

We headed back to the compound. There was no pretending now. We were renegades in the fullest sense of the word, and soon we'd be taking the government head on in a full-scale civil war because of decisions made long before we were born. But, as the stream of relief militiamen came towards us down the mountain, I knew we'd win in the end. They filled their vehicles with purpose and canine warriors, wearing determination on their sweat-streaked faces, holding their AR 15s in loving embrace.

I pulled to the side of the road and stopped. "Listen, Franks," I said, "do you hear that?"

"It sounds like...."

"A goat." I walked towards the pleading bleating and found the black and gray fellow tied to a bush. Somebody had left him to die. Probably ran when the bombs dropped. I cut his tether and carried him back to the jeep, the memory of how the

Federation children were taught to abuse animals flooding my mind. If I had any doubts about the rightness of our war, they disappeared when I cradled the terrified, thirsty animal in my arms.

"Fremont on his way to the hangar," Franks said. "Halter got through to him. Are we going to keep this guy?"

"You bet. What did Fremont say?"

"He needs a co-pilot for a trip to Dearborn Michigan."

"Tell Halter to radio Fremont and tell I'm on my way." ❖

# “THE FALL OF THE BLACK VULTURE GANG AT THE HANDS OF THE SORCERER CALLED BENEDICTUS”

by Cam Rhys Lay

I

The rain had just turned to snow when the sorcerer called Benedictus rode across the shallow, nameless river west of Brustal. On the other bank, he dismounted his horse and ate the last remains of a bread loaf he'd bought two days before in Langdan. Had there been any wind that afternoon, he probably wouldn't have heard the calls in the distance; as it was, the air was still and the only other sounds were the whispers of snow landing upon the gray moors.

At first, he thought the cries were those of an animal, but as he listened further, he identified them for what they were: a man.

He road toward the calls, locating their source in the proximity of a yew tree two hundred paces away.

A man sat at the foot of the tree's far side, covering his eyes with his hands. As the sorcerer drew near, the man shouted out, his words laced with sobs. "Over here! Please!"

"What's the matter?" the sorcerer said, stepping down beside the man.

"You're not one of them, are you?"

"Just a traveler," he said. Both true and untrue.

The man's face and hands were red with blood. The sorcerer knelt down to

look closer. The man's eyes bore dark red wounds as if poked by a small knife or the tip of an arrowhead.

The sorcerer called Benedictus was never much good with healing, but he did what he could.

He laid his fingers on the man's face, concentrated, mumbled the words.

"What are you doing?" the man said.

"Quiet," the sorcerer said. He unsheathed the knife strapped to his hip and cut a strip of cloth from his green riding cloak. The cloak was but a month old. An unlucky thing to have to ruin it so soon. There was no helping it though. He wrapped the strip of fabric around the man's eyes. "What's your name?"

"Raymont," the man said.

"You live in Brustal, Raymont?"

"Just north of it."

"Very well," the sorcerer said and bore the man up upon his horse.

II

"Will I see again?"

Raymont lay in his bed as Benedictus applied a salve he'd made out of goat's milk and a mixture of herbs he'd picked up from the general store.

"I'm not sure," the sorcerer said.

When he'd found Raymont—perhaps

judging from the man's clean-shaven face—the sorcerer had taken him for a younger man, but now, up close, he could see the strands of gray in the man's brown hair, the lines around his eyes. He guessed him somewhere in early middle age—roughly the same as the sorcerer *appeared*, though he was much older. “The wounds are bad. But the bleeding has mostly stopped now. You'll live.”

“A blind carpenter,” Raymont said in a low, desperate voice. “I'll be reduced to groveling in the village square.”

The sorcerer wrapped a fresh bandage he'd gotten at the village store around Raymont's head. “Worry about that later. For now, rest.”

Afterwards, the sorcerer fed his patient a little of the stew he'd made on the stove.

“Tell me now. Who did this to you?” the sorcerer said as he guided a spoonful into Raymont's mouth.

Raymont swallowed. “I...don't know.”

The sorcerer placed the bowl on the table beside the bed. “Don't know or can't tell?”

“Both. They said they'd kill me.”

“Who's *they*?”

“I don't have a name.”

“What *do* you have?”

Raymont considered the request. “Who are you? What you did when you found me...”

“I'm Benedictus. As I've said, I'm a traveler.”

“No normal traveler.”

“I do have ... *abilities*, if that's what you mean.”

Raymont rolled away from Benedictus now as if, though he couldn't see, he didn't want to face the sorcerer.

“I... was visiting a spot that Ervina... my wife... we used to go there together. A boulder shaped like a ball and lodged in the earth. I was sitting upon it when I saw, in the distance, Farmer Alram's house on fire.

“I ran toward the fire thinking to help; there was smoke everywhere. It was hard to see. I heard shouting, and then, at my feet, was the farmer's son, dead on the ground with his insides spilling out of his belly like a bowl of wet snakes. Not far away were the bodies of Alram's wife and daughter, naked and with their throats slashed.”

“Take your time,” the sorcerer said and placed a hand on Raymont's trembling arm.

“I'm no fighter, you know? All I could think to do was hide behind a tree. There was more shouting. I peeked around to look. There were three of them standing over Farmer Alram. I only saw the faces of two. One had a shaven head and a mean look and a nose that appeared like it had been broken. The other was tall with long blond hair. You might say he was one of them handsome types, even. The third had his back to me with his cloak pulled up.”

“Did you recognize either of the two you saw?”

“Not the bald one, for sure. I would have remembered a cruel face like that. But the handsome one—I think I might have seen him in the village. I don't go there much, so I'm not sure.”

“What happened to the farmer?”

“They were all shouting some questions at him. I was too scared to catch anything they were saying. I think Alram might have called one of them... Snake? No... *Slug*. He called one of them *Slug*. And then... the bald one... he lifted up his blade and hacked at Alram’s neck. Didn’t get the job done cleanly on the first swing so he just kept chopping and cutting until... It was quiet. So quiet after.

“I ran then... fast as I could, but they saw me. The blond one got on his horse and rode me down. He tied me up and brought me back to the burned-up house. It had started raining by then. They talked among themselves, the two I described to you, about what to do with me and whether to put me to the sword. I don’t know where the third went off to. Finally, the bald one suggested they just poke my eyes out, so I could never identify their faces. ‘Mercy,’ he called it.

“And the bald one took out a knife and...”

Raymont squeezed the sorcerer’s hand hard.

Later, Benedictus refilled Raymont’s bowl of stew and placed it back on the table next to the bed. “In case you get hungry there’s more for you here,” he said

“You’re leaving?”

“Only for a little while. I’ll check on you later. Is there anyone else in *Brustal* I should tell about you?”

“No. Wife’s dead three years now,” Raymont said.

“I’m sorry,” the sorcerer said. He knew

what it was like to have a dead wife.

“We weren’t much of lovers, you know. But she was... a kind woman. A good friend.”

“I understand.”

“Where are you going?” Raymont said.

“...”

“They’re probably far from here by now.”

“Might be.”

“I’m right then? You’re going after them? Don’t, on account of me. These are dangerous men.”

“Not as dangerous as I am,” the sorcerer said.

### III

“Back so soon?” said the shopkeeper as the sorcerer stepped in through the heavy, iron-framed, door. “More herbs then?”

“No.” He shook the snow off his slightly mutilated riding cloak.

“Then how may I serve?”

“You know *Farmer Alram*?”

“Of course. Biggest land owner in the county. Has got a tract just over that way,” he said gesturing out west. “A fine man with a fine family...”

“He’s dead.”

“What?” the shopkeeper said. “I think you’re mistaken. I saw *Alram* just the other...”

“What about any man here who goes by *Slug*?”

The shopkeeper was a small fellow, a head shorter than the sorcerer; he looked up into Benedictus’s green eyes and gave a nervous smile. “*Here*? Well there’s just you

and me here, traveler. No one else.”

“You know my meaning.”

“In the village then?”

The sorcerer just looked at him.

“Well, I don’t want any trouble...”

“Where can I find him?”

“You must understand. I don’t know him. Only know *of* him. Heard stories. An outlaw, they say. Runs with The Black Vulture Gang.”

“And where can I find this Black Vulture Gang?”

“No one knows where their hideout is or else the Redcloaks would have hung ‘em all a long time ago, I think. Then again, Redcloaks don’t seem too concerned about these parts, so maybe not.”

“So where can I find them?”

“Well,” the shopkeeper said and straightened his shirt, “I’ve heard that some of their lot drink spirits at the place here in town.” He gestured around back to where Benedictus knew the alehouse was.

The sorcerer placed a few coppers on the counter.

“No, no, no. I’m not taking any coin for giving information on those boys,” he said. “If you’re doing what I think you’re doing than that’s payment enough. Good luck, friend.”

#### IV

Even before the owner of the alehouse could ask Benedictus what he wanted to drink, the sorcerer pounded his fist on a table, stood up on a chair, and shouted to everyone inside.

“Anyone here know where I can find

that lot of cowards called ‘The Black Vulture Gang?’”

Everyone was quiet. A few looked toward the corner of the room where a man of twenty-some years with golden hair tied into a tail sat flanked on either side by two women in tight bodices. The blond man stood up and smiled, displaying a perfect set of teeth. He took two steps toward the sorcerer and pulled out a curved dagger. “Who wants to know?”

“Me.”

“And who the fuck is you?”

“You the one they call ‘Slug?’”

The man laughed. He turned back to the women. “This dumb cunt wants to know if I’m ‘The Slug?’” The women laughed. Even from across the room the sorcerer could see their irises, purple from the ameghemite powder.

“I most definitely am not no Slug. That bald bastard ain’t neither as pretty as me nor is his cock as big as mine. Ask these whores,” he said and gestured to the two women.

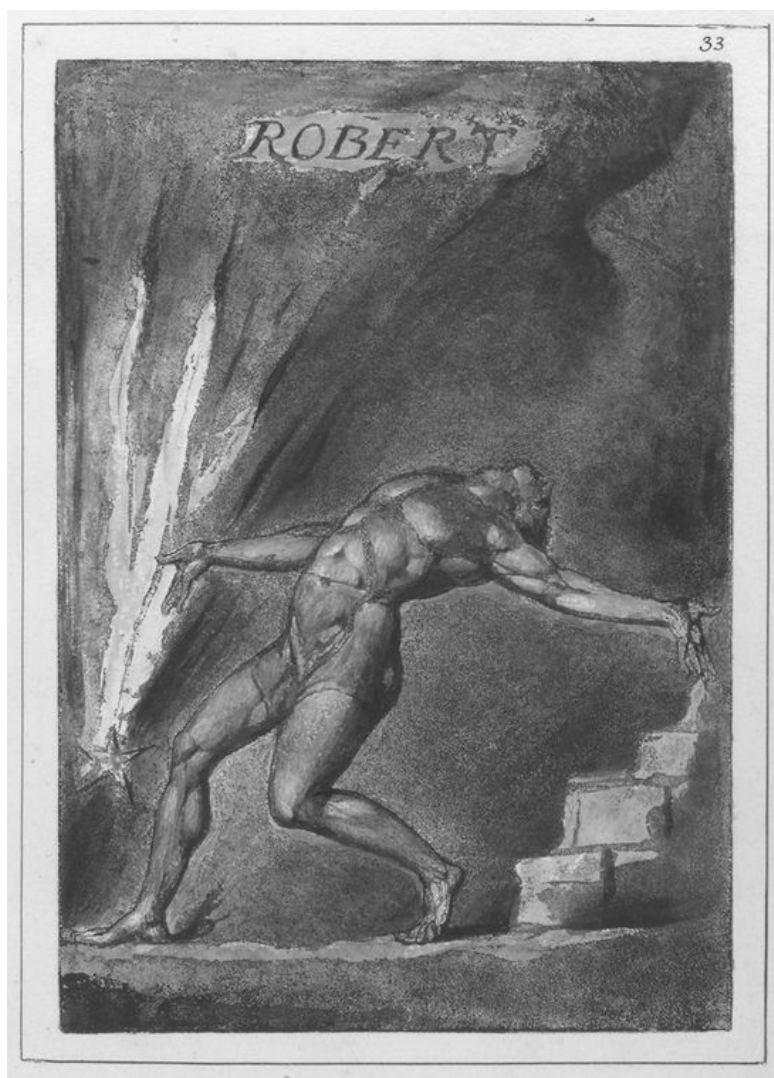
“Then what’s your name?” Benedictus said. He stepped down from the chair to stand face to face with the man, only inches away. There was a momentary change of expression on the blond man’s face as he beheld the formidable visage of the sorcerer up close; a second later, his smile returned.

“Fuck your mother,” he said, and spittle flew from his mouth landing on the sorcerer’s cheek.

“May I assume you are part of this Black Vulture Gang, *Fuck your Mother?*”

“So what if I am?”





"You and your comrades have been up to a lot. Over at the farmer's house..."

"I've no idea what you're talking about."

"...not to mention what you did to that carpenter. Must have been a thrill watching your friend poking at his eyes. Pretty stupid to think he couldn't still describe you though. But what should I expect from your lot?"

The blond man's smile vanished. He raised his blade. "Listen you little fuck," he started to say, but then froze where he stood—his body paralyzed, his words caught

in his mouth.

A useful spell if there ever was one.

Benedictus had half a mind to incinerate the blond man where he stood. He needed him alive though. For now.

The sorcerer took the curved dagger from the blond man's unmoving hand and set it down on the bar. "What did your friend use on the carpenter? Couldn't have been this thing."

The blond man tried to speak, but all that came out was a stifled grunt.

Benedictus went behind the counter and found a small but sharp knife—like the kind you might use to cut a venison chop. "Maybe something like this?" he said, displaying the blade.

He ran his finger along the knife's edge. Sharp. It had been his intent just to slash this asshole a few times across his face, yet there was something about the look the blond man gave that infuriated him—reminded him of the many injustices he'd watched go unpunished.

He turned to the others still in the alehouse: the two women, the owner, a few patrons. "You may not want to stay for this," he said, showing them the knife. One-by-one, they filed out.

The sorcerer had taken many lives over his long years, yet later, he would think of how there was something particularly monstrous with the pleasure he took in cutting

off the man's nose, dragging the blade through the cartilage and breaking through the last sinews of flesh with a bloody yank.

The man would have screamed if he could, but Benedictus's spell still circled about him. The sorcerer grabbed a rag used to wipe tables and held it to the man's face to staunch the bleeding.

"Listen," he said, showing the severed nose to its owner. "I'm going to keep this. You're going to go to whatever hole your friends congregate in and tell them I will be waiting for them outside this very establishment at first light. They can show up or I can hunt each of them down like the assholes they are. In return for you doing this, I will consider re-attaching this to your face. It won't be perfect, but with luck, you won't have anything worse than a bad scar. Blink if you understand."

The man blinked furiously.

Benedictus released the man from his spell and, at last, the man's scream was loosed upon the world. He grabbed the cloth and, holding it to his face, ran out.

"And make sure The Slug is one of those you bring," the sorcerer said.

Benedictus pocketed the nose in a small leather pouch and wiped the blade he'd borrowed on his cloak. The cloak was ruined already anyway.

V

"Who is it?" Raymont said.

"It's me," Benedictus said.

He bid the sorcerer enter. It had grown dark and the fire in the hearth had burned down to a scattering of glowing embers.

"I wasn't sure you'd return," Raymont said. He lay in bed where the sorcerer had left him.

"I said I would."

"But those men. They're dangerous."

"We'll find out tomorrow,"

"Tomorrow?"

"Outside the alehouse at first light."

"You must be some great warrior, indeed. Or mad."

"Maybe."

He checked Raymont's wounds again, removing the bandages, stained now with blackish red. He took a wet cloth and wiped the skin around Raymont's eyes. The wounds had mostly closed. Maybe his talents in healing weren't as shabby as he'd thought. The left eye had been poked a little off center and with some luck, Raymont might see yet. Not as he had before, but some sight is better than none. He rewrapped the bandages.

The sorcerer brought a cup of water to Raymont's lips. "Here. Drink."

Raymont took a long sip and then coughed from it going down too fast. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"Why are you helping me?" Raymont said.

The sorcerer stood up and put another log in the hearth to resurrect the fire.

*You would have died.*

*Wouldn't any good person do the same?*

"Benedictus?"

*Because I've done enough evil for many lifetimes.*

*To forget.*

"You needed help," the sorcerer said.

"Is that it?"

"You ask a lot of questions." He took something out of his bag and placed it on the table. "There's some bread and cheese here," he said then.

"You're leaving again?"

"I'm going to the inn. I need a little sleep before daybreak."

"You could stay here," Raymont said. "I've got blankets in the cupboard."

"I've no wish to impose."

"It wouldn't be no imposition. I... feel safer with you here. I suppose that doesn't make me much of a man saying such, does it?"

"I'll need to leave before dawn."

"I know."

"Let me put my horse in the stable down the road then. In case it starts snowing again."

## VI

Indeed, it did snow, and the next morning nearly a foot of fresh white powder covered the village.

Just before the sorcerer set off—perhaps a half hour before dawn—he shook Raymont awake. "I have to go," he said.

"Will you return?" Raymont said, sleep in his voice.

"I intend to."

Benedictus stepped toward the door. "Wait," Raymont said. "I was just thinking... before you go... could you tell me what you look like?"

"What I *look like*?"

"In case."

"What do you want to know?"

"You know. Describe yourself."

It had been a long time since Benedictus paid mind to how he looked. He supposed he was taller than most, but not all. His skin was a shade darker than those of this country, but not by much. He had brown hair, green eyes, no beard. He told Raymont all this.

"That doesn't give me much of a picture," Raymont said. "Could you just come here?"

Benedictus sat down on the bed. Raymont's hand found the sorcerer's arm and crawled upwards to his face. Raymont's fingers traced the lines of the other man's nose and mouth and eyes, and the sorcerer allowed this for a time.

"I have to go," he said and stood up.

"Good luck."

When Benedictus rode up to the alehouse, a crowd of villagers were gathered outside, wrapped in furs and blankets. The sorcerer recognized a few of them—the owner of the alehouse, the proprietor of the village store; none of The Black Vulture Gang had yet arrived. As he approached, a few of the onlookers clapped and one yelled "our hero!"

Just then, Benedictus saw two riders galloping toward them from down the road east.

The crowd stirred. "This them?" someone said.

"There's only two."

"Maybe they wanted a fair fight."

"Black Vultures don't care none about no fair fight."

It soon was apparent that the two rid-

ers were not part of The Black Vulture Gang. The first was a weary, gray-bearded man of around sixty. Beneath his furs one could see the hem of his cape—the blood red of the imperial government. The other rider was far younger, maybe only fifteen or so, with a bow on his back and long brown hair. He might have been mistaken for a girl if not for the beginnings of a mustache that sprouted above his lip.

The riders stopped twenty paces from where the sorcerer sat upon his horse.

“You the traveler, Benedictus?” the old man said.

“Maybe. Who are you?”

“I’m Constable Hartmann from Galhan.” He unwrapped his fur, further exposing his cape. Galhan, Benedictus knew, was the county seat a half day’s ride from Brustal. “Word is you’re stirring up trouble.”

“Trouble and justice sometimes ride together.”

“Justice is my business,” Hartmann said.

“And a fine job you’ve done. Families murdered in their homes. A man’s eyes gouged out.”

“Now I don’t know anything of what you’re talking about, but—”

“He’s right!” a woman in the crowd called. “They found Farmer Alram’s whole family slaughtered last night!”

“Well,” the constable said. “That’s no good at all. I’m sorry for that. We do the best we can with what we have but there’s a lot of country falls under my jurisdiction and unfortunately—”

“Then you should appreciate a little help,” the sorcerer said.

“Don’t know I can accept the help of a vigilante,” the constable said, but just then a man in the crowd shouted, “let him help.” This was joined by the shouts of several of the other villagers. Soon twenty people were chanting in unison and banging their boots upon the ground. *Let him help! Let him help!*

The constable looked around, shrugged. “Well, I see the will of the citizenry has spoken. Not to mention that I’m not sure what I’d do with The Black Vulture Gang when they arrived. This is you and them though. I hope you’re up for it. I don’t feel like dying today.” At that, the old man and his squire dismounted their horses, walked them over to a nearby stable, and joined the crowd.

## VII

They came from the south.

Benedictus had assumed there would be four or five; this was not the case. There were a dozen riders: hooded and tightly wrapped in furs, each with a sword strapped to his side, many with bows on their backs. Among them was the blonde man from the day before, his face wrapped in black cloth where his nose had been. Most of them appeared to be Lakelanders, although two were of darker complexion—Kallanbori perhaps—and another wore full plate armor and a helmet which prevented anyone from seeing his face at all.

The onlookers retreated under the eaves of the nearby buildings; the riders

spread out, trying to surround Benedictus in the space between the alehouse and the inn across the road.

“No further!” Benedictus shouted, in a voice louder than any man ought to be capable of. The riders’ horses each reared up. All but one, that is. This last one remained completely under the control of its rider, being brought to a standstill by a gentle tug of the reins. It was then that Benedictus saw that this one—a young man with brown hair peeking out of the top of his cloak—was a sorcerer as well.

The twelve riders were positioned now in a kind of crescent facing Benedictus in the empty road.

“You’re late,” Benedictus said. His eyes stayed fixed on the other sorcerer.

“You so eager to die, man?” said one of them who had removed his hood, displaying his shaven head.

Benedictus dismounted and sent his horse in the direction of the alehouse. It had been a dutiful beast these last months and he didn’t want it harmed. “You’re The Slug?” he said to the bald man.

“That’s right.”

“I have a proposition for all of you. Turn over this one you call Slug and this one also,” Benedictus said gesturing to the sorcerer. “Lay down your arms and ride out. In exchange, I’ll let you all live and *Fuck your Mother* will get his nose back.” He took out the pouch which contained the nose and held it up for all to see.

“Can we fucking kill this guy yet?” one of the dark-skinned ones said. “It’s cold out.”

As if in response, The Slug drew a dagger and hurled it at Benedictus. The blade darted through the air with deadly speed and accuracy. When it was an arm’s distance from its intended target though, it changed course, looping back towards the man who’d thrown it—equally fast, equally accurate. Yet just before it plunged itself into The Slug’s throat, it fell to the snow as if swatted from the air by the hand of an invisible giant. Benedictus looked at the other sorcerer, whose hood had been pulled down now.

Not a young man. A woman.

“We’ve got one of your kind,” The Slug said. He brought his horse forward and the other riders followed suit.

They’d closed half the distance to Benedictus when he mumbled something unintelligible and waved his hand across his body. An arc of the snowy ground before him burst into blue-green flame. Eleven of the twelve riders stopped, but one among them—brave and stupid—coaxed his horse into leaping over the flames.

“No, you can’t,” the sorceress said, and she was right. The fire burned too hot and too high and rider and horse both were set ablaze. They crashed to the earth, not three steps in front of Benedictus, a heap of burning flesh.

“Go around,” The Slug shouted, and the riders brought their horses in single file along the sides of the buildings, out of the way of the fiery ground. All this was slow going though, and Benedictus ran around to the side of one of the houses.

He cast a spell to conceal himself so

that now when he was still he'd appear as no more than a shimmer. It was not his way to hide, but with twelve, and a sorcerer among them, he would have to change his approach.

"Where'd he go?" said the rider who was first around the corner, a man with a gold ring hanging from his septum.

"Couldn't have gone far," The Slug said. "Fan out. Search the village."

Benedictus crouched, unmoving, next to the house, and smiled.

## VIII

Twelve members of The Black Vulture Gang had come to Brustal that morning and one had already been turned into a heap of ash outside the alehouse.

That meant eleven remained.

Two were riding just past the village well, searching for their man, when an unseen force prompted each of their horses to hurl its rider to the cold ground. The men shouted as their bodies sailed through the wintry air. The first one struck his temple upon a jagged stone protruding from the dirt, his skull splitting like the summer melons that wouldn't be in season for some months yet. The second man landed more gracefully—only suffering a twisted ankle and a few scrapes. He fared less well when, as he hopped on his good foot towards his fallen cross bow, Benedictus snuck up behind him and opened his throat with a dagger.

Nine.

The two dark-skinned men (perhaps they were brothers, Benedictus thought)

were riding beside the slaughterhouse when an arrow from a cross bow, shot from the shadows of a pig shed, struck one of them in the ear. A second arrow zipped towards them, but by this time the second man had raised a wooden shield which intercepted the shot with a loud *thwump*. If only he would have raised his shield three inches higher, the third arrow wouldn't have struck him in the forehead.

Seven.

Another spontaneously caught fire next to the granary—a feat which required quite a lot of concentration and effort on the part of Benedictus. He certainly didn't have the energy to do *that* six more times.

Six.

When one of the other Black Vultures heard the burning man's screams and tried to extinguish him by smothering him in a fur, he was run through from behind by a thin-bladed sword. Strangely, the man didn't feel the blow at first, but instead watched confusedly as the pointy end of the sword grew out of his naval like a strange, steel appendage. That said, when the sword turned upwards, opening up the man's torso, he could no longer maintain the claim of not feeling anything.

Five.

A few minutes later, the man in full armor—armor he'd stolen from a knight he'd poisoned some years back—had dismounted and was using his mailed foot to break down the doors of various buildings in search of Benedictus. To tell the truth, the armored man didn't much think the sorcerer would be inside any of these, but

figured he'd let the other fellows take care of that sorcerous cunt while he had his fun busting into houses. He half hoped some idiotic villager, upon his breaking down their door, might try and stab him with a kitchen knife or something (futile against armor), at which point he would feel totally justified in removing said villager's head from their shoulders. It was a strange thing how the armor really gave him a sense of invincibility. Perhaps it wasn't completely misplaced. Armor, after all, did make him impervious to all kinds of blows—from normal men. Against a man hiding behind a barrel in a vacant house who, with a wave of the hand, could dent armor and otherwise shrink the space inside a helmet until said helmet was too small for a grown man's brain, much less his skull... well, he did not fare too well against this kind of man.

Four.

## IX

The remaining four had not gone searching for Benedictus but had remained in front of the alehouse. These four consisted of The Slug, the sorceress, Fuck Your Mother, and a fourth with a strip of hair down the center of his otherwise-shaven scalp, who, for expediency, we shall call *B*. In truth, the man's name, while starting with *B*, was a rather hard-to-pronounce name of no less than six syllables that had remained in the man's family some three hundred years all the way back to the days of the old Lakeland tribes.

But since he would only live for another

five minutes, for our purposes, *B* will suffice.

Facing four adversaries was something usually within the range of Benedictus's abilities; however, one of the four was a sorceress and Benedictus was spent from his dealings with the other men—sorcery being more taxing than some supposed. Still, these four weren't apt to run around chasing him like the others, so Benedictus had little choice but to face them now.

"Your men are dead," Benedictus said as he walked back into the snowy road.

"So... what...?" said The Slug. "You giving us our last chance to surrender?"

"No," Benedictus said, but then turned to the sorceress. "Still, I should like to know how you ended up with these thugs."

"We all have to make a living," she said.

"Not this way," Benedictus said.

She spit. "*You're* one to judge—the biggest criminal of them all!"

The wind had picked up and it lifted Benedictus's, partially cut, bloodstained cloak so that it billowed up behind him.

"I was just a scared girl, just come to the White City, when you left," she said. "You didn't go by Benedictus then though, did you?"

He wasn't completely surprised she recognized him. Sorcerers had to learn somewhere.

"You've grown into a fine woman since those days," he said.

"Maybe not, but the Brotherhood would forgive everything I ever done if I pointed them in your direction."

“Enough of this fucking blathering,” *B* said and charged. Benedictus, needing to save any further spell work to deal with the sorceress, raised his sword, waited until the last moment, then jumped aside and ran his attacker through the belly. *B* fell from his mount, three hundred years of a family name ending here, in front of the Brustal alehouse.

He hadn't yet turned back to face the other three when he felt the meridians changing around him. He caught a glimpse of the sorceress, sitting upon her horse with her eyes closed, and felt the ground beneath his feet start to give way. He dove to his right, landing on his face, just as a large crater opened up in the ground. The twang of arrows sounded and Benedictus, still laying on his stomach, rolled to the side to avoid the shots. One arrow was far off the mark, but the second grazed him in the leg. Of greater concern was the globe of white light that struck him in his chest now—singeing his clothing and sucking the breath from his lungs.

His cloak really was a mess now. It would be expensive to replace. Of course, if this woman were a better sorceress, he'd be dead.

He regained his feet—blood flowing from his nose, his mouth. She'd had her chance. He felt the meridians again and a half-dozen tendrils of smoke curled out of the sorceress's hand toward him. He raised his own hand and the smoke vanished. He shouted, and all three riders were knocked from their horses; the sorceress and Fuck Your Mother crashed to the ground on

their backs, but The Slug somehow managed to land on his feet. All at once, the large man unsheathed another dagger and lunged at Benedictus. The sorcerer tried to call up a spell, but he was already nauseous and exhausted, and his ball of mage fire fizzled into nothing.

The Slug's blade arced toward him; Benedictus only just caught the man's wrist before the dagger was sunk into his heart. Still, the force of the The Slug's lunge knocked Benedictus to his back, even as he tried to hold the blade's point at bay. Benedictus was no small man, but with the full weight of The Slug pushing down on the blade, its point slowly came down to Benedictus's shoulder, cutting through cloak then skin then muscle.

“Fucking die,” The Slug said.

Yet then the expression on The Slug's face changed—to one of confusion and then pain. The Slug's strength left his body and Benedictus rolled the man off him. He stood up, removed the dagger from his shoulder and looked down at The Slug's corpse, two arrows sticking out from his side.

Benedictus turned in the direction of the crowd at the constable. The old man shrugged his shoulders and pointed to his squire who held his bow up, a third arrow notched and ready to fire.

“Told him not to get involved, but he didn't listen,” the constable said.

Benedictus nodded thanks to the boy, who gestured off down the road. The sorceress and Fuck Your Mother were riding away.



## X

By the time Benedictus bandaged his shoulder and brought his horse around, the two fugitives were out of sight. Still, they'd left deep tracks in the snow, which would be easy enough to follow.

"Not satisfied with the ones you got?" the constable said, gesturing to the bodies strewn about the village.

Benedictus's only reply was the spurring on of his horse.

He followed the tracks off the road, down a trail that crossed a narrow stream and then wound between two hills. Perhaps five miles from the outskirts of Brustal, he came to a line of trees behind which was a small cabin built partially into the hillside. He dismounted and crept toward the wooden structure on foot. His shoulder ached, but otherwise he'd regained a little of the energy he'd spent back in the village.

As he approached the cabin, he heard the two remaining members of The Black Vulture Gang shouting.

"Come on! Come on!" Fuck Your Mother said, "He could be here any minute. I want to be half way to Brolaine by nightfall."

"We're not going to Brolaine," the sorceress said.

"Then far away from this sorcerer cocksucker, at least!"

"Well, if we're broke when we get where we're going, that's not going to be much fun either, so calm down and help me with packing up this gold."

"Calm down, she says."

"Yes, Lothair. Calm down."

"Calm down? You little bitch! Maybe if I had a fucking nose—"

Fuck Your Mother's voice halted mid-sentence. Benedictus heard a gurgling noise and a crash.

He guessed he'd only be dealing with one member of The Black Vulture Gang now.

He walked alongside the cabin to the front door, which was slightly ajar and stepped in without a sound. The sorceress's back was to him and he watched her load several small gold bars into a chest. Fuck Your Mother lay unmoving on the floor.

"Sorceress," he said.

She turned with a start. "You." She placed the small chest on the ground. "If what they say about you is true, then me putting up a fight won't make much difference, will it?" she said.

"You can try."

She smiled bitterly. "Why do you give a shit about these people? I thought you hated the Empire."

"Citizens of the Empire and the Empire aren't the same."

"If you say so," she said and lowered her head in resignation.

Afterwards, the sorcerer called Benedictus searched her burned, blackened body for any evidence that pointed to exactly who she was. He couldn't find anything.

He finished packing up the chest of gold. On his way out, he looked down at Fuck Your Mother's body one last time.

*Lothair was your name, eh?*

He removed the nose from his pocket and dropped it upon its owner.

## XI

It was mid-afternoon by the time the sorcerer called Benedictus rode back into Brustal. The constable and his boy were outside the alehouse talking to a few of the villagers about something or another.

“Can you finish up here?” the constable said to his squire. The boy nodded. “Come walk with me,” he said to Benedictus as the sorcerer dismounted. They walked back behind a stable where the two could talk in private.

“Find ‘em?” the constable said.

The sorcerer nodded.

“Good, I suppose. I was up at Farmer Alam’s this morning and... I guess I knew what I’d find up there, but it’s always different when you see it up close.”

“It is.”

The constable muttered something underneath his breath. “Say,” he said then, “I’m an old son of a bitch and when you were gone I remembered something—from a long time ago. A bulletin that went around about some sorcerer down in the Southland helping the rebels there. I’m not sure, but I think that sorcerer went by Benedictus too.”

“And?” the sorcerer called Benedictus said.

“And I’m not the only one who’d remember that. Word of what happened here will spread... And with your name...”

“I know,” the sorcerer said and then handed a sack of something to the constable.

ble.

“What’s this?”

The constable might not have been good at his job, but he was an honest man, Benedictus thought. “Gold,” the sorcerer said. “Can you make sure it gets into the hands of those that suffered on account of The Black Vultures?”

He stopped by Raymont’s house a final time.

“I woke up from a nap this afternoon and I could see a little!” Raymont said as soon as the sorcerer walked in the house. He was out of bed, seated in the room’s one chair. One of his eyes was still bandaged, the other, while red and partially scabbed over, already looked much better. “Not a lot, and only out of one eye, but...”

“I’m glad,” the sorcerer said. “I have to be moving on now.”

“Now?”

He nodded.

“And the men who did this?”

“Won’t be bothering you.”

Raymont got up and approached the sorcerer, his arms out to prevent him from running into something. “I see you, I think, but...” When he reached Benedictus, he threw his arms around him and started sobbing.

The sorcerer, not knowing what else to do, patted Raymont on the back.

“Surely you can stay until tomorrow,” Raymont said.

“I’ll spend the night at the next village over. I have to go now to reach there by sunset.” The sorcerer handed Raymont a

small pouch containing all but one of the gold bars he'd kept from what he'd given the constable. "This may be useful."

Raymont didn't look to see what was inside the pouch. He just took it and went to sit down in bed again. "Goodbye, friend," he said.

The sorcerer called Benedictus turned and walked out the door. In his pocket he fingered the last of the small gold bars.

This would be more than enough for a new cloak. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**