

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**



**AN ASTRA MILITARUM STORY**

**BAPHOMET  
BY NIGHT**

**PETER McLEAN**

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# **BAPHOMET BY NIGHT**

**Peter McLean**

The drop-ship hit a wall of turbulence that almost rammed Corporal Cully's spine out of the back of his neck. He was used to drops, him and Sergeant Rachain, but they were the only ones who were. The other corporal too, maybe. Jemsin, she was called, and she looked tough enough, but the green troops they had been given for a platoon were pale with fear as the drop-ship plunged through the impenetrable thick black clouds of pollution that shrouded forge world Baphomet.

Garrison duty was good though, Cully thought. He felt he was owed a break after the Vardan campaign, him and Rachain both. He had his doubts about the lieutenant, this Delaney, who didn't look old enough to shave, but so what? A platoon didn't need much of an officer if it had a good enough sergeant, and he knew his old friend Rachain was one of the best in the regiment.

The drop-ship slammed into another pocket of turbulence, then fell like a brick for half a mile before levelling out again. Cully felt his ident-tags and the old silver aquila he wore around his neck lifting off his chest in the suddenly reduced gravity. One of the recruits leaned forward in his harness and vomited on his boots. Another looked like she might be about to cry.

Cully shook his head, silently thanking the Golden Throne that they weren't actually going into battle with these children.

The turbulence eased as the drop-ship continued to shed altitude, but Cully still couldn't see anything except choking black clouds outside the viewport. Eventually the ship broke through the cloud cover, its lights showing him brief glimpses of shattered ferrocrete and bombed manufactories, an uplink mast towering over the centre of Beleth City. It was the middle of the night, and visibility was so bad the pilot was coming in on auspex alone. At least no one

was shooting at them this time. The war for Baphomet had been over for a week or more, the Chaos cult that had overrun the planet defeated, and the ruined forge world was finally back in the hands of the Imperium where it belonged.

The ship banked, and Cully saw the lights of a dropsite picked out below them, jerry-rigged from standard issue Guard lamp packs. There was a temporary camp down there, lit by dim glow-lamps, and what looked like a few semi-permanent shelters made from flakboard and camo netting.

The roar of the drop-ship's engines rose to a shrill scream as it decelerated violently. The recruit who had vomited earlier found it in him to heave up again, into his own lap this time. Puke Boy, Cully immediately named him.

He never bothered learning raw recruits' actual names until they had survived their first firefight. It simply wasn't worth the effort. Rachain caught his eye across the troop bay, and winked. The thing with the names was an old joke of theirs, almost a tradition by then, and he wondered if the sergeant had had the same thought.

The ship crashed down onto the cracked rockcrete of the dropsite with a bang that jarred Cully's teeth in his skull, clouds of greasy steam venting from the inertial dampers as it settled onto its landing gear. Cully hit the quick-release latch on his drop-harness and got to his feet, hurriedly un-racking his lasgun and pack from the webbing beside him. Rachain was already equipped and bawling orders.

'Up!' the sergeant roared. 'No time for dallying in the Astra Militarum. Up and deploy. This is beautiful Baphomet, and it's home until the Emperor says otherwise.'

Muttered curses echoed through the drop-ship as the recruits fumbled their way out of their harnesses, getting their packs and lasguns tangled in their haste to obey the sergeant. The drop-ramp slammed down and cold air rushed into the crew bay, carrying the smell of smoke and stale fyceline.

Rachain was down the ramp now, waving the recruits out. Jemsin was first, her pack over her heavy shoulders and her lasgun held in combat order as she herded her squad out. Cully would have been surprised if this lot had practised drop deployment more than once back in basic training, and it showed. He rounded up his own squad, Puke Boy and Crying Girl among them, and stamped his way down the ramp into the cold darkness.

'Deployed, sergeant,' he said to Rachain.

'If that's what you call it,' Rachain muttered, then looked towards the camp. 'Hold up, here come the welcoming committee.'

A burly Guard sergeant was approaching them with two men at her back. She was filthy and her flak armour was cracked, and she had a long, stained bandage covering her left forearm where her sleeve had been torn away. Delaney stepped forward to greet her as other Guardsmen began to show themselves, packs already over their shoulders.

‘Lieutenant Delaney, Reslian Forty-Fifth,’ he introduced himself. ‘We’re your relief.’

‘Didn’t think you were here sightseeing,’ she said. ‘Sergeant Wyman. I’m the CO here, since we lost the lieutenant.’

She didn’t offer their regiment, Cully noticed, but their violet eyes and tattered insignia told him they were Cadians. There only seemed to be about ten of them left at the outpost, and they were all wounded and dirty. He offered up a silent prayer of thanks to the Emperor that they had been spared the actual fighting this time – it looked like the battle for Baphomet had been hard won.

‘We’ve left you well supplied,’ Wyman added. ‘You won’t go hungry on your little holiday.’

Delaney just nodded at that. The tactical briefing he had held for his officers before they left the troop ship had included a message from the *Departmento Munitorum* to that effect. The outpost might be low on troops but there was enough food and ammunition there to last them months, which at least spared them from having to unload the usual heavy supply crates. Baphomet was turning out to be the softest posting Cully could remember.

‘Transport’s ready when you are, Wyman,’ Rachain said to her.

‘Oh, we’re ready,’ the big woman said. ‘Have fun.’

She led her surviving men up the ramp and into the waiting drop-ship without another word, and Rachain hurried their platoon out of blast range as its engines began to rumble.

‘Right, well, we’ll show ourselves around then, shall we?’ Cully muttered to himself.

Puke Boy looked like he was about to say something, but as soon as he opened his mouth the drop-ship’s engines let out a bellow that drowned him out. It lifted off the rockcrete and took to the sky with a noise like thunder.

Cully turned and led his squad into the camp, and found Rachain walking at his side.

“‘The camp will be found in good order,’” the sergeant said, quoting the words of the *Departmento Munitorum* from their briefing. “‘A full handover will be received from the departing personnel.’” Of course it will.’

Cully shrugged. The Munitorum were a bunch of stylus-pushing chair-polishers, as far as he was concerned, and he had long since learned not to rely on anything they said.

‘So what else is new?’ he said.

‘Named your squad yet?’

‘Puke Boy and Crying Girl, so far,’ Cully said, and the sergeant laughed. ‘Does that Jemsin know a lasgun from a lho-stick?’

‘Seems to,’ Rachain said. ‘I hate getting put in a leftovers unit like this where we don’t know anyone. Troops are all green as grass, though, not that it should matter. I can’t see we’ll be doing anything but playing dice for the next two months anyway.’

‘Suits me,’ said Cully. ‘I’m for my bunk unless you need me. We can have a poke around in the morning.’

Rachain nodded and went to help Delaney set up in the camp’s command post, which was little more than a damp flakboard shack. Cully found the bunkhouse, picking his way by the light of the glow-lamps that had been strung up on cables running off the site generator. It was cold, and the camp stank, but at least no one was shooting at him and they weren’t likely to start, so on the whole he reckoned he was winning. He claimed a bunk, stowed his gear, said his nightly devotions to the Emperor, and lay down. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

It was still the middle of the night when Cully woke up. He could hear someone snoring in another bunk, but the smell of caff was wafting in from outside the bunkhouse and he was wide awake now anyway.

He shoved his feet into his boots and walked outside, past the sleeping men and into the lamp-lit darkness.

‘What time do you call this, corporal?’ Rachain asked him.

He was tending a cook stove, stirring a pan of caff that looked to have the consistency of used sump oil from a halftrack.

Cully blinked at him, then looked at his chrono. It read 8am, local time.

‘Throne. Sorry, sarge,’ he said, then frowned. It was still pitch dark beyond the feeble reach of the camp lights. ‘Did... We did set chronos for local time, right?’

‘We did,’ Rachain said. ‘I think this is as light as it gets.’

Cully remembered the blanket of solid black pollution that the drop-ship had come down through.

‘Oh.’

‘Yeah,’ Rachain said. ‘Welcome to beautiful Baphomet, shame you can’t see it.’

‘Who’s got the patrol?’ Cully asked.

‘Three Stars and Snotty and another one, from Jemsin’s squad,’ Rachain said.

Cully smirked. Three Stars was a girl of eighteen with a badly tattooed star worked on the side of her neck and another one on the back of each hand. A former ganger before she got conscripted, by the look of her, wiry and tough-looking. He hadn’t had the pleasure of meeting Snotty yet, but he sounded delightful. A thought struck him.

‘Have we got enough lamp packs?’

‘What?’

‘I mean, if it isn’t ever going to get light here, we’re going to need a lot just for guard duties, never mind patrol. A lot.’

Rachain grunted and poured the caff into two battered tin mugs.

‘Are you trying to depress me, Cully?’

‘Sorry, sarge.’

The sergeant sipped his caff and sighed.

‘No, you’re right. And no, we haven’t.’ He winced. ‘This caff is truly hideous.’

Cully sniffed his and took a sip that made him grimace. Guard-issue caff was never what you’d call good, but this stuff had a slick, oily sheen to it and a taste that coated his tongue and made him feel like he’d been licking rancid meat.

‘Tastes like my boot,’ he agreed. ‘Where did you get it from?’

Rachain jerked his head in the direction of the supply shack.

‘It was in there, same place everything else is. It smells like your boot in there too, Cully.’

Cully took another sip then tipped the rest out onto the ground.

‘Must be a bad packet,’ he said. ‘I’ll go kick my mob out of their bunks and then we can—’

He was interrupted by a scream, and the sharp crackle of a lasgun being fired on full auto.

‘What the—’

Rachain was on his feet then, weapon ready as he scanned the dark camp. The harsh bark of a stubber came from somewhere away beyond the perimeter.

‘Get your squad up!’ Rachain ordered, and raced off towards the shooting.

Cully charged into the bunkhouse and hammered a metal support pole with the butt of his lasgun, making a clanging noise fit to raise the dead.

‘Attack!’ he roared. ‘Defend the camp!’

Recruits rolled out of their bunks and grabbed their weapons. They would have drilled this enough times in basic, at least. Cully grabbed his vox-bead and ran

back out of the bunkhouse. He activated the lamp pack attached to his lasgun as he got into cover. A thin beam of sharp white light cut through the gloom and he swung the weapon in a tight arc, hunting targets.

Puke Boy ran past him with his lasgun at the hip, firing wildly at nothing in obvious panic.

‘Down!’ Cully shouted at him, and the boy dropped like he’d been shot.

Away to his left came two tight, measured shots, the las cracking with cold professionalism. Rachain, or maybe Jemsin. The recruits were firing blind, shooting wildly and lighting up the darkness as though a whole greenskin warband was charging them.

‘Hold fire!’ Rachain bellowed from somewhere to his right. ‘Hold, you idiots!’

Cully snugged the butt of his lasgun tighter to his shoulder and wondered where the lieutenant was. The stubber opened up again, its muzzle flash bright in the darkness. None of their platoon had stubbers. Cully shot straight at it.

‘Underhive!’ screamed a woman’s voice in the distance, followed by another long burst of wild las-fire. ‘For the underhive!’

Three Stars, then. There was a harsh bark of stubber fire, and she fell silent.

‘*Jemsin, forward,*’ Rachain ordered over the vox, his voice crackling in Cully’s ear.

‘Two Squad, on me and advance!’ Jemsin shouted from Cully’s left.

Her squad followed the light of her lamp pack.

‘One Squad, hold perimeter,’ Cully said. Another burst of las-fire from some idiot. ‘No shooting, you half-wit, you’ll hit Two!’

Silence fell, Two Squad’s nervous advance the only sound. Cully could see the beams of lamp packs cutting the darkness as they moved. Jemsin’s was steady and purposeful, the others trembling and swinging wildly around, illuminating a street of bombed-out buildings carpeted with rubble and broken plasglass. The outskirts of Beleth, he realised.

‘*Clear,*’ she voxed back.

‘*Hold position,*’ Rachain told her. ‘*One Squad, leapfrog and advance.*’

‘Sir,’ Cully acknowledged, and waved his troops after him.

He passed Jemsin’s position in a low crouch, his weapon set to his shoulder and the beam of his lamp pack playing down the street ahead of him, heading towards where he had seen the muzzle flash from the stubber. There was no sign of the weapon or whoever had been firing it, but a moment later his light washed over a pool of fresh blood. He froze, following the blood until the light caught a pale, outstretched hand.

A woman's hand, crudely tattooed with a star.

'Medic!' he bellowed.

Sawbones hurried to his call. Cully swallowed as the young field medic crouched beside Three Stars' body. He turned to Cully a moment later, and shook his head.

'No,' he said, and Cully sighed.

'Corporal, over here,' Crying Girl said.

Cully went to her, his lamp illuminating what she had found.

There were two young Guardsmen lying dead against the wall, their flak armour punched through with multiple holes from stub rounds. Snotty and the other one, Cully could only assume. Cully bowed his head and offered a prayer to the Emperor for their souls. He turned to Crying Girl, who had survived her first firefight.

'Remind me what your name is?' he asked her.

'Trooper Kallek, corporal,' she said.

'Right then, Kallek, get back to camp and tell the sergeant what you found. Don't shout about it to the others, don't make a fuss. Understand?'

'Corporal,' she said, and she went.

She was pale and shaken, but she wasn't crying anymore. Cully nodded to himself. She'd do, he thought. He sank down onto his haunches to guard the bodies and wait for Rachain to tell him what to do.

'Dammit, man, I need a signal!' Lieutenant Delaney barked at Squawk. 'I have to report the attack to HQ.'

The vox officer hadn't left the command post during the fighting any more than Delaney himself had, so he didn't deserve a proper name yet, as far as Cully was concerned. Kallek did, and so did Morran who had been Puke Boy, and the others, but not Squawk. Not yet, anyway.

'I'm sorry, sir,' Squawk said, fiddling yet again with the field vox. 'It's just static all the way across the band. It must be all the pollution in the air, and everything left over from the bombing.'

Delaney swore and gulped from a flask of sacra that he shouldn't have had, his hand trembling. They were in the command post, all three officers huddled around the field vox with Delaney and Squawk, and three of the platoon were lying dead under tarps in the medicae tent.

'We didn't kill *any* of them?' Delaney asked for the third time.

'No, sir,' Rachain said again. 'Or if we did, they took their dead with them,

which I doubt. Chaos cultists... don't usually do that.'

'Perhaps if we'd had more men fighting, we might have done,' Cully said. 'Sir.'  
'Stow it, corporal,' Rachain snapped at him.

Cully looked at his friend for a moment, then down at the floor. The sergeant was right, of course – being insubordinate to Delaney now wouldn't change the fact that the lieutenant had hidden in his command post and left Rachain to take charge during the attack. He sighed. Three Stars had been undisciplined, of course, as gangers always were, but she'd seemed like a tough kid. At least she'd gone down fighting, the way the Emperor expected. He looked up and gave Delaney a glare.

'Corporal,' Rachain said in a low voice, 'I want you to go and check the stores. Right now.'

Cully nodded and went before he said something he really shouldn't have done. That wasn't the first time Rachain had saved him from himself in front of an officer, and he knew it wouldn't be the last, either.

He ducked out of the command post and headed across the camp to the supply shack, finding his way by the light of the glow-lamps. He pushed the flakboard door open, and almost gagged as the smell hit him.

The ration packs were stacked neatly on metal racking against the walls the way they should be, the big drums of water lined up underneath, all done by the book. Except that half the ration packs had black gunge seeping out of them, dripping slowly onto the floor. Cully swallowed bile. He'd have to detail a couple of troopers to sort through them all, he thought, clear out everything that was rotten so it didn't spread to the stuff that was still good.

He turned to the ammunition dump, metal crates stacked with lasgun power packs. The way some of those idiots had been shooting last night, their weapons were probably down to half charge or less already. He'd get them to reload now, he decided, in case it happened again. Hopefully the incursion had just been a couple of enemy stragglers trying their luck, but you never knew.

He was leaving the shack when he found Puke Boy – Trooper Morran now – heading the other way.

'Morran,' Cully said. 'Ammo check.'

Morran glanced at the gauge on his lasgun.

'Thirty per cent, corporal.'

'That's what you get for shooting full auto at nothing,' Cully snapped at him. 'Get in there and get a reload.'

Morran saluted and did as he was told. He'd have to take the squad through

weapons discipline all over again, Cully realised. Whatever they'd learned in basic had clearly gone straight out of their heads as soon as the shooting started. He was thinking about that when Morran came back out of the supply shack.

'Uh, corporal?' Morran said hesitantly. 'Sorry, I... I must be doing this wrong. It doesn't fit.'

'What doesn't fit, Morran?' Cully said.

He turned to see Morran holding his lasgun in one hand and a fresh power pack in the other, a frown of utter confusion on his young face. Cully sighed.

'What you're holding in your left hand is an M-thirty-five Short-pattern lasgun, Trooper Morran, the same as everyone else's. What you have in your right hand is a power pack for an M-thirty-six. Of course it doesn't fit. Go and get the right size and try again.'

'But they're all the same, corporal,' Morran said.

Cully swallowed.

'What?'

'I thought maybe I had the wrong size, so I checked the other crates. All the power packs in there are like this one.'

'No,' Cully said. 'Oh no, no. Don't do this to me, Morran.'

He shouldered past the boy and back into the stench of the supply shack. All the ammo crates were open, where Morran had been desperately searching for something to fit his weapon. They had hundreds of power packs there, as they had been promised by the Departamento Munitorum, and all of them were Cadian Kantrael M36 pattern.

Cully ran back to the command post and shoved the door open without knocking. Delaney was still cursing at Squawk, and the field vox was still producing nothing but howls of static. Rachain turned and gave Cully a look.

'We have got a major problem,' Cully said.

'I expect you to bring me solutions, not problems, corporal,' Delaney snapped.

'What is it?' Rachain asked.

'The ammo,' Cully said, ignoring the lieutenant completely. 'It's the wrong pattern. All of it.'

'No,' Rachain said, and thumped his hand down on the folding table. 'No, that can't be right.'

Cully shrugged. 'Well it is, and half the rations are tainted too. We'll starve before we're scheduled to be relieved, and with the way the troops were firing earlier we've barely got enough ammo to defend ourselves if those cultists come back again.'

‘I’ll call in a supply drop from HQ,’ Delaney announced. ‘Request reinforcements, too, in case there are more of them out there. Maybe a tank.’

Rachain looked pointedly at the field vox.

‘Any luck, Squawk?’

The vox operator shook his head.

‘It’s almost seven hundred miles to HQ, and the atmospheric conditions are hopeless,’ he said. ‘We won’t get a signal out there on this set.’

Delaney licked his lips nervously. He was quite obviously out of his depth and he knew it.

‘Sergeant,’ he said at last. ‘Your recommendation?’

Rachain sighed. ‘The vox is useless, and no one’s walking seven hundred miles in a hurry.’

‘Is there any way we can boost the vox signal?’ Jemsin asked.

‘Not without an uplink mast, which we haven’t got,’ Squawk said. ‘Even if we had, I don’t think this set has got the power we’d need to cut through the interference.’

‘Hang on a minute,’ Cully said. ‘I saw an uplink mast from the drop-ship. It’s in the middle of the city somewhere. Wouldn’t that have a hardwired master vox system attached to it, something that would be able to get a signal out?’

‘It should have,’ Squawk said, ‘but do you even know where it is? In case you hadn’t noticed it’s pitch black out there.’

‘Shut up, Squawk,’ Rachain said. ‘Cully, you’re a genius. I’ll lead Jemsin’s squad myself, with your lot holding the camp, and—’

‘No,’ Delaney interrupted him. ‘I will. You don’t have the rank to order reinforcements, and I have. It has to be me who speaks to HQ. I’m leaving you in command of the camp until I return.’

‘Sir,’ Rachain said, and saluted the officer.

Maybe you’re not such a coward after all, Cully thought.

Delaney left an hour later, leading Jemsin and her squad into the darkness. Squawk had gone with the lieutenant, his heavy vox-set on his back. Cully stood at the perimeter and watched them go, following the beams of their lamp packs until they were out of sight. He could hear them over the short-range vox, Jemsin’s voice coming through the bead in his ear as she gave curt, efficient orders.

‘The Emperor protects,’ he whispered.

He sighed and turned back to the camp.

Morran was there, and Kallek, and another lad called Vorn. Vorn had found a pack of caff that hadn't gone bad, and he was brewing for the squad over a camp stove. Cully gratefully accepted a cup.

'Are we going to be all right, corporal?' Morran asked. 'I mean, what if there's hundreds of them out there?'

'Of course there aren't hundreds of them,' Cully said. 'We won the battle here, Morran. There may be one or two pockets of stragglers like the ones who attacked us, but no more than that. We'll be fine.'

He glanced at Morran's lasgun with its thirty per cent charge, and prayed that he was right.

It was getting colder, and the wind was picking up. The heavy banks of cloud overhead shifted, allowing dim grey light to filter through. Not enough to see by, not by a long way, but enough to make out vague shapes in the darkness. Somehow that was worse.

'Come on,' he said. 'Let's have a hand of cards.'

Delaney's team had been gone for perhaps an hour when the shooting started.

Cully's vox-bead exploded with shouting, the sound of lasguns and the long, ugly bark of stubbers.

'You hear something?' Kallek asked, lifting her head into the wind.

Cully was the only one there wearing an earpiece.

'*Fall back!*' That was Delaney, sounding urgent. '*Jemsin, where are you?*'

'No,' Cully said.

Someone screamed over the vox, and there was a loud rolling explosion that sounded like a whole clutch of frag grenades going off at once. It was audible even from the camp.

'I heard *that*,' Vorn said.

'Sit still and finish the game,' Cully said. 'I need to talk to the sergeant about something.'

He found Rachain sitting in the command post, head in his hands as he too listened to what was playing out over his vox-bead.

'It sounds bad,' Cully said, and the sergeant nodded.

'*Where's the—*'

More shooting over the vox. A confused babble of voices, raised in panic.

'*I'm out of ammo!*'

'*There's too many of—*'

Stubber fire, sounding like it was coming from two directions.

*'The corporal's down! Repeat, the—'*

The roar of an explosion.

*'Help me!'*

The vox cut out suddenly.

Cully looked up and met Rachain's bleak stare. Outside, a cold wind blew.

Rachain addressed the troops shortly afterwards.

'I have reason to believe that the lieutenant and Two Squad have met heavy resistance in the city,' he announced. 'We lost vox contact some fifteen minutes ago. I don't think we can depend on them to make it through, or to come back.'

He paused to let that sink in. Cully watched his squad, the nine troopers that were all they had left now apart from Sawbones. Morran looked terrified. Kallek was crying again, but that had long since stopped being funny. Everything had.

'This is now very serious,' Rachain went on. 'I want a full supply audit, right now, and ammunition level reports from each of you. Get to it.'

Cully saluted and detailed Vorn and another lad, Dolven, to the supply shack.

'Pile all the fouled food outside the shack,' he told them. 'We'll burn it, later.'

They went to do as he said, but an hour later they were back.

'It's hopeless, corporal,' Vorn said. 'It's nearly all bad. Everything. Even the last of the caff has turned to slime. What's wrong with it?'

Cully stared at him.

'Chaos is what's wrong with it, lad,' he said. 'This whole place is still tainted.'

He went to report to Rachain, who just shook his head.

'I'm not convinced this war is as won as we think it is,' the sergeant said, 'but we haven't got enough ammo to do anything about it. Jemsin's squad took the best of what we had with them. Cully... I'm sorry, but you're going to have to go and find them. Take three men, salvage what you can.'

Cully saluted and went. He chose Morran, Kallek and Vorn, and led them out of the camp the way Delaney's party had gone.

He had Rachain's pocket auspex at least, otherwise they'd never have found them. He followed the fast-fading heat trail down a darkened street then into a service road between two huge, shattered warehouses, and there the trail went cold. He motioned his three troopers to be still while he fiddled with the device in his hand, trying to increase the gain.

'Emperor's sake, doesn't anything work properly?' Morran muttered.

'Don't you go taking His name in vain,' Cully snapped. 'The Emperor protects, boy, you remember that. When there's nothing standing between you and the

Archenemy but flak armour and the aquila, you'll find your faith soon enough, trust me.'

'Yes, corporal.'

A moment later the auspex found Two Squad's heat trail again, and they crossed another access road and stepped through a gate into what had once been a plaza of some sort. That was where Delaney's squad had been ambushed.

Cully played the light of his lamp pack slowly over the scene of horror that greeted them. The men and women of Two Squad had been disembowelled, their corpses crucified on the chainlink fence that surrounded the plaza. Squawk's field vox was embedded in his empty chest cavity, the handset rammed into his mouth. Delaney's head was mounted on a spike sticking out of a fencepost.

There was a wet splatter as Morran threw up on the ground.

Only Jemsin had been left alone. She was lying dead with a wall at her back, her lasgun still clutched in her cold hands. There were five dead cultists sprawled on the ground around her.

'You fought well, corporal,' Cully whispered.

They saluted their dead, the four of them, and that was all they could do.

'Collect up their power packs, all of them,' Cully said. 'Grenades too, if they've got any left. Bayonets, rations, anything worth having. Get to it.'

While the team set to the grisly work at hand, Cully inspected the bodies of the cultists. Their comrades had taken their stubbers, but otherwise left them where they had fallen. Cully turned one over with the end of his lasgun, unwilling to touch the foul corpse.

It was a man, heavy-set and middle-aged by the looks of him, perhaps a foreman in a manufactory before his corruption by the Dark Gods. It was hard to tell, what with the armoured welding mask that was crudely sutured across his face.

He wore a thick rubberised worksuit that had been converted into rudimentary armour, but left his burly arms bare. Cully squinted, looking closer at what he had initially taken to be a wound on the back of the man's left forearm. It wasn't, he saw now, or at least not one caused by fighting. The man had carved a mark of Chaos into his own flesh, a vile sigil of the unclean that made Cully feel sick just to look at it. He shuddered and moved on, and saw that the other bodies all bore the same mark in the same place.

'Done, corporal,' Kallek said, and he turned.

They had six power packs between them, with bayonets, canteens and ration packs to match, and four remaining frag grenades.

‘There were more of them than that,’ Cully said.

‘Well, not everyone’s here,’ Vorn said. ‘Either they’re still alive or, uh, the enemy took some of the bodies with them.’

Cully looked at the plaza, at Jemsin’s bullet-riddled corpse and Delaney’s head on its spike, and shook his head.

‘They aren’t still alive,’ he said quietly. ‘Come on, back to the camp.’

They were half way across a service road when a burst of stub fire blew Vorn’s head apart.

Cully threw himself into cover behind a pile of rubble and dragged Kallek down after him. Morran was still on the far side of the street, cowering behind the wreckage of a groundcar and firing wildly at the building the shots had come from. An upstairs window lit with a muzzle flash as the stubber opened up again, making Morran dive under the car for shelter.

Kallek was shooting now, her full-auto fire peppering the rockcrete around the window and achieving nothing.

‘Hold fire!’ Cully hissed at her. ‘We haven’t got ammo to burn.’ He looked up at the window, judging the angle, then touched Kallek’s arm. ‘On three, open up again. Cover me.’

She nodded. ‘One, two... three!’ Her lasgun cracked furiously once more and Cully reared up from cover and hurled one of the four precious grenades. It flew perfectly through the window and detonated with a roar that threw smoke and rubble and bits of bodies out into the street.

Cully ducked back into cover, counting. After twenty he began to relax.

‘Clear,’ he called, and stood up.

Morran wriggled out from under the groundcar and pushed his helmet back to wipe sweat from his forehead despite the cold of the street.

‘Stay here,’ Cully said, and crossed the street and ducked into the building.

He found a broken staircase, and in a room above it the mangled bodies of two cultists and the remains of a tripod-mounted heavy stubber, twisted and ruined by the explosion. There was nothing left worth looting.

Back in the street, Kallek was saying the Benediction of the Emperor over Vorn. Cully waited for her to finish then led his remaining team back to the camp.

No one spoke on the way.

‘A man’s dead for three grenades and half a dozen mostly spent power packs,’ Cully snarled at Rachain.

‘And six ration packs,’ the sergeant said. ‘We’ll need every one of them, you mark my words. Everything in the supply shack has turned to filth now, and there’s nothing edible to hunt or gather in a place like this. The city is ruins, and the other direction is just poisonous wasteland for as far as I dared send anyone to look.’

Cully grunted. It was night by then, as far as they could tell anyway, and he had the squad sleeping in shifts while others kept guard at the camp perimeter. They didn’t send out any more patrols.

‘I know,’ Cully said. ‘Sorry, sarge. I didn’t mean to sound like I was questioning your orders.’

Rachain put a hand on his shoulder.

‘We have to get a message to HQ,’ he said. ‘Delaney was right about that. There’s no way this is just stragglers, not after what you saw in that plaza. Beleth still belongs to Chaos. The general needs to send a regiment at least, proper combat troops to clear it out. If we don’t find a way to tell them, they’ll be sending in civilians in a couple of months to start rebuilding. It’ll be a massacre. It’s our duty as Guardsmen to get that message out or die trying.’

Cully nodded.

‘It’s that or starve anyway,’ he said, ‘and I’d rather die fighting.’

‘Good man,’ the sergeant said. ‘Come the morning we’re abandoning the camp and blasting our way through to that uplink station whatever it takes.’

‘The Emperor protects,’ Cully said, and went to get some sleep while he could.

The next morning they headed out: Rachain, Cully, Sawbones, Kallek, Morran and the other six remaining troopers. They had eaten the last of their rations that morning, washed down with brackish water that had sent Trooper Harlan running to the latrine afterwards. Limardi was complaining about her guts too, but there was nothing to be done about that.

‘Set all weapons to single shot and keep them there,’ Rachain said. ‘Our priority is the uplink station. We’re not fighting if we can avoid it, but if we’re attacked, make every shot count.’

There were murmurs of assent, the crunch of boots on loose rubble the only other sound as the squad moved slowly into Beleth. All lamp packs were off at Rachain’s order, and he was leading them in almost total darkness by his auspex alone. They had only a vague idea of which direction the uplink station lay in, and no desire to draw attention to themselves with lights.

Cully did what any Guardsman should: he hitched up his pack, said a prayer to

the Emperor, and marched into the darkness.

They had been in Beleth for two days, lost in the dark. Harlan was dead, killed in the first ambush, and Morran was leaning on Cinkosky and dragging a leg that had been almost shredded by stubber fire. Sawbones had done what he could, but he couldn't work miracles.

They had run out of grenades yesterday.

'We're going in circles,' Cully hissed to Rachain, keeping his voice too low for the others to hear. 'We passed this manufactory yesterday.'

'Nonsense,' Rachain snapped.

Cully keyed his lamp pack for a moment, illuminating the dead cultist he knew was hanging sprawled out of a loading dock. He had shot the man himself, after all.

'What's that, then?'

Rachain cursed and dropped into a crouch, taking a very small sip from his canteen. They were dangerously low on water now, and none of them had eaten anything since the morning before last.

'Emperor save us,' Rachain whispered. He pulled the auspex out of the thigh pocket of his combat uniform and shook it, cursed it, prayed over it. Nothing worked. The thing was as dead as they'd all be, soon. 'How are we for ammo?'

'Hopeless,' Cully said. 'No one's got more than ten per cent left, now. One more firefight and we're done.'

'Remember Vardan?' Rachain said, as though Cully would ever be likely to forget it. 'We were short of supplies there, too. Power packs recharge if you leave them out in sunlight.'

'There *isn't* any sunlight,' Cully hissed at him. 'There isn't going to *be* any sunlight, not here. Not ever.'

'Maybe not,' Rachain said, 'but I remember something those Catachans told us. If you're really stuck, and I'd say we are, you can get some charge back in a power pack by cooking it in a camp fire.'

Cully nodded slowly. He remembered that too, now that the sergeant mentioned it.

'Where's it safe to light a fire, where it won't be seen?'

'In there, I reckon,' Rachain said, nodding towards the hulking ruin of the manufactory. He laughed hollowly. 'We've already cleared it out once, after all.'

Cully nodded. He waved the squad up, and together they crept into the building and swept it with their lights. It was empty. He detailed Limardi and Bonsell to

building a fire, using the discarded packing foam and sacking that littered the place as fuel. It stank but it caught well enough, and was soon a crackling blaze in the middle of the blackened rockcrete floor.

‘We’ll just do one first, see if it works,’ Rachain said.

He took Morran’s lasgun and ejected the almost-spent power pack, and set it carefully at the edge of the fire. They settled down to wait, huddling around the blaze to warm themselves. Cully was starving but he was at least warm for the first time in days, and he felt himself beginning to doze.

The concussive shock of the explosion threw him onto his side, probably the only thing that saved him from the shrapnel that flew over his head and shredded Trooper Leehan where he sat.

Cully lay prone, his almost empty lasgun tracking in the dark, looking for an enemy who wasn’t there.

‘The power pack,’ Kallek said, her voice sounding flat and dead as she stared at what was left of Leehan. ‘It blew up.’

Rachain cursed, picked up a lump of broken rockcrete and hurled it across the factory space in a blind rage. Cully sat up and put his head in his hands. Just for a moment then he had been almost happy, and now the nightmare was back.

‘Right,’ Rachain said, getting himself back under control. ‘Fix bayonets. Save every shot you’ve got left until it’s a sure kill. If we have to do this like animals, then we will.’

‘I heard something,’ Sawbones said. ‘Outside.’

‘Someone heard the explosion?’ Dolven asked.

Cully could only shrug. He finished fitting the long, wicked bayonet to his lasgun and moved towards the window in a low crouch. There was something moving in the street outside, too dark to make out. He sighted along his las but without using the lamp pack he couldn’t get a target, and he knew that if he did he’d give them away. He squinted, willing his fire-blind eyes to soak up every scrap of the almost non-existent light.

Stub fire tore in through another window. Someone screamed. A lasgun cracked once, twice. Cully dropped and rolled, bringing his bayonet up as a dark shape surged through the window just above him. He felt resistance as his blade met flesh, then a hot rush of liquid on his hands. He tore and hacked with the bayonet, turning his lasgun into a spear like the most primitive of feral-worlders. He snarled, rearing up over the fallen cultist and stabbing down with the bayonet to be sure of his kill.

Somewhere in the firelight and confusion Rachain was roaring curses. The

stubber barked again, then there was a single crack of las-fire and it fell silent.

‘Yes!’

Dolven whooped with joy at his kill, then a cultist loomed up behind him and ran him through with a crudely made sword. Cully sighted and fired in a single move, the las-shot taking the cultist full in the face and spinning him around and down onto his back with smoke rising from his ruined head.

Silence fell, broken only by Rachain’s snarls. He was crouching beside the fire, his lasgun in one hand and a spare bayonet in the other, both running red.

Dolven and Leehan were dead for sure, and Sawbones and Bonsell were both down and not moving. Cully held his breath and counted to twenty, in a taut firing position with his weapon hard to his shoulder and his heartbeat thundering in his ears.

‘Clear,’ he said at last, and sagged to his knees with relief.

Kallek was staring into space, her bayonet dripping blood and a look of horror on her face. She had a dead cultist at her feet, a serrated axe clutched in his hands. Limardi and Cinkosky checked the fallen while Morran sat by the fire clutching his leg, which was bleeding heavily again.

‘Sawbones is dead,’ Cinkosky said.

Limardi looked at Cully and nodded. ‘So’s Bonsell.’

Cully just nodded, and glanced at Morran. With the state of his leg and the medic gone, he didn’t give much for his chances, either.

‘Check them for weapons, food, anything we can use,’ he said.

He left them to it and crossed to Rachain.

‘Pull yourself together,’ he hissed at the sergeant. ‘You still have the command here.’

Rachain blinked and looked at his friend, and let out a long sigh.

‘I nearly...’ he started, and looked down at the bayonet in his hand. ‘In the confusion, I nearly stabbed Sawbones.’

Cully looked at the fallen medic, at the gaping bayonet wound in his gut. He licked his lips nervously, looked at Rachain again.

‘These things happen,’ he said. ‘Looks like someone else got him, hey?’

Rachain nodded, wiped his weapons clean on a dead cultist’s clothes and got to his feet.

‘What have we got?’ he asked.

‘Some rusty junk turned into close-combat weapons,’ Kallek said. ‘Nothing worth having.’

‘They had a stubber, at least one,’ Cully protested.

The woman shrugged hopelessly. ‘Well, they haven’t now,’ she said. ‘Survivors must have taken it and run.’

Cully let his head rock back on his shoulders, and offered up a prayer for salvation to the Emperor. Rachain was barely in his right mind, Kallek looked like she’d given up, and Morran was white with blood loss. That left him, Limardi and Cinkosky in a fit state to fight, and one of them would have to virtually carry Morran. It was no good, it wasn’t going to work. He looked at Morran again, sitting slumped by the fire and drifting in and out of consciousness.

Rachain looked up and met his eyes, and Cully knew they were thinking the same thing. Without another word Rachain crossed to Morran and spoke the Emperor’s Benediction over him. His blade came down hard and fast, and at least it was over quickly.

Limardi and Cinkosky were staring at him with looks of horror on their faces, while Kallek was just looking at the wall and seeing nothing at all.

‘Move out,’ Rachain said.

Cully’s chrono had been broken in the fighting, and he had no way to gauge time in the constant darkness. At least another day must have passed, perhaps more. They slept when they could, hiding like rats in the freezing rubble. The hunger was maddening now, and he was so thirsty he was beginning to hallucinate.

That morning, Limardi had been so crazed by thirst that she had drunk from a puddle of polluted water, lapping it up on her hands and knees like a frantic animal. Now the poison in the water was killing her even as they crept along the edge of what seemed to be a main thoroughfare into the heart of the city. She stopped to vomit yet again, shaking and weeping in a broken archway as she brought up blood and filth.

‘I’ll stay with her,’ Kallek said. ‘Go on, I’ll catch you up.’

Cully and Rachain exchanged looks, but they nodded and pressed on. When Kallek caught up with them ten minutes later she was alone, and no one asked any questions. Cinkosky had the point, Rachain behind him, and Cully on the six. He waved Kallek into position between him and the sergeant.

Sometimes a trooper had to be helped to enter the Emperor’s Grace, and that was just how it was.

Up front, Cinkosky hissed a warning.

‘Light, up ahead,’ he whispered. ‘Looks like a camp fire.’

They joined him hurriedly, peering around the corner of a fire-blackened

building and down an incline to a low courtyard. There were flames flickering down there, and three hunched figures crouched around them. Something was roasting on a spit over the fire, and Cully almost moaned as the scent of cooking meat reached his nostrils. One of the cultists lifted a flask to his lips and took a long swallow of something, and that decided it.

Rachain tapped his bayonet, put a finger to his lips, and crept out of the shadows with the others behind him. The four of them spread out around the tiny camp, surrounding it as best they could. Rachain let out a furious bellow and they charged as one, stabbing and hacking in a desperate frenzy. That fire, that meat and drink, was the difference between life and death.

They chose life.

When it was done Cully snatched up a flask and gulped water as fast as he could, hardly caring any more whether it was clean or not. The others were doing the same, he saw, and then Rachain was using his bloody bayonet to cut meat from the roast on its long spit and the smell was heaven and the taste was life and salvation and Cully ate and drank until he was sobbing with relief.

They had almost eaten their fill when Cully sat forwards to warm his greasy hands over the flames, and he saw what was lying in the ashes under the roast meat.

It was a blackened set of Guard ident-tags.

He swallowed, and looked across the fire at Kallek and Cinkosky and Rachain. They looked so content, and he knew he couldn't take that away from them. He looked down at the meat, and wondered which of the missing members of Two Squad they were eating.

Corporal Cully whispered a prayer for the Emperor's forgiveness, and cut himself another slice.

They camped there for a while, sleeping in pairs while the other two kept watch. Cully had drawn the second watch with Kallek, and they talked in low voices while Rachain and Cinkosky snored behind them, wrapped in the dead cultist's stinking blankets.

'I never wanted to join the Guard,' she said. 'I suppose most people don't.'

'I did,' Cully said. 'It was that or work myself to death to meet my hive's production targets week after week until I was too old and broken to be useful anymore. Better to die serving the Emperor.'

'The hives serve the Emperor too,' Kallek said. 'Toil in His name is a virtue.'

Cully looked at her and nodded slowly. She was devout too, in her way, he

realised.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that it wasn’t.’

‘I worked a power-loom,’ she said. ‘I was good at it, too. Top tenth percentile for production on my work cycle three quarters running. I was... I was proud of that. But the Guard needed troops so they held a founding, and I was called up.’ She was silent for a moment, then she shrugged. ‘So I went. What else could I do?’

‘Nothing,’ Cully said. ‘When the Emperor calls, we answer. The Emperor expects every man to do his duty.’

‘And every woman.’

‘Exactly that,’ Cully said. ‘We ought to get them up.’

Kallek nodded, and they roused Rachain and Cinkosky from their sleep and together they breakfasted on the cold roast meat they had left. Cully had managed to hide the ident-tags while no one was looking, and he had forced himself not to read them to see who it had been. He didn’t want to know.

‘Let’s see what we’ve got, then,’ Cinkosky said, and he began to ransack the cultist’s belongings.

They found three stubbers, heavily modified and etched with the same vile Chaos sigils that were carved into the cultists’ arms. The Mark of Baphomet, Cully had come to think of it as, and it made him sick to look at it. There were belts of ammunition too, and more canteens of drinkable water. Cully looked at the enemy weapons and felt his stomach turn over. The taint of the Archenemy was so strong on the things he could almost taste it.

Rachain was sitting away from the others, keeping watch down the street while they searched.

‘I don’t think we ought to use them,’ he said to Rachain, once he joined him on the rise.

‘What?’ Rachain said, blinking up at him in surprise.

He had his bayonet in his right hand, and he quickly hid his left arm behind his back when he saw Cully looking at him. Cully licked his lips nervously, turned to check that the others were out of earshot.

‘What’s wrong with your arm?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing, my boot, Rachain,’ he snapped. ‘Show me.’

The sergeant shrugged, his eyes narrowing with distrust.

‘I got a scratch in the fight last night, that’s all.’

‘I’ve got a medi-pack I took off Sawbones,’ Cully said. ‘If you’re wounded then

it needs dressing. You could get any sort of infection out here.'

'Yeah,' Rachain admitted. 'All right.'

Cully produced the med kit and Rachain reluctantly held his arm out. Cully swallowed. He had already known by then, but still it was like being kicked in the guts.

Sergeant Rachain had been cutting the Mark of Baphomet into the back of his left arm.

Cully dressed and bound the wound without comment, but things were different between them now. He remembered the bandage around Sergeant Wyman's left arm as she boarded the drop-ship with her men. All of them wounded, filthy. They knew, he realised. The Cadians they had relieved had all been tainted by Chaos, as he feared Rachain now was, and they knew the city hadn't been cleansed at all, but had been letting the cultists continue their vile worship unopposed. The whole of Beleth City was a trap, and that meant it was more vital than ever that he get a warning out to HQ.

He should kill Rachain, he knew that. Had his hand on his bayonet, even, as the sergeant stared out into the endless darkness, but where would that get him? The vox station was close now, he could feel it, but he knew he'd never reach it with just Kallek and Cinkosky. Rachain was a veteran and a killer, and he needed him.

And he was his oldest friend.

'There you go,' he said, sealing the bandage with a stretch of binding tape.

Rachain just nodded.

'Collect the stubbers and ammo,' he said. 'We'll move out in a few minutes.'

'I still don't think we should touch them,' Cully said, but he knew it was no good.

'Collect the stubbers,' Rachain said again. 'That's an order, corporal.'

There was nothing Cully could do but salute and do as the sergeant said.

They set off shortly after that, Cully, Rachain and Cinkosky each struggling with the weight of a stubber and its ammo belts while Kallek had two lasguns and all their power packs.

'How does this thing work, corporal?' Cinkosky hissed at him, fumbling with the stubber's mechanical belt feed. 'We never saw these in basic.'

Cully showed him quickly, wincing as his foot turned on a loose chunk of rubble he hadn't even seen. It skittered across the road, the sound painfully loud in the cold darkness. He stumbled, nearly fell, and Kallek put out a hand to steady him.

‘What’s that?’ Cinkosky asked suddenly, turning to look behind them, and then there was the familiar, dreaded *whummmppff* of a flamer.

The street lit up bright as day as a jet of fire belched out of a doorway and consumed Cinkosky. He flailed and shrieked as he burned, arms pinwheeling in his agony. Kallek shot him out of mercy, then turned and sent a cracking volley of las-fire in the direction the flames had come from.

The air reeked of promethium and roast meat.

Rachain was firing and screaming together, his stubber blazing in his hands. Stub fire was coming back at them, making it obvious that the flamer man wasn’t alone.

Cully slammed the charging handle of his own weapon forward, braced it as best he could, and squeezed the crude trigger.

The recoil staggered him, the weapon bucking and leaping in his hands as it tore chunks out of the building. A moment later, there was an almighty explosion as the flamer’s tanks went up, taking its user and his accomplice with it.

Cully lowered his weapon, the barrel glowing hot in the dark, and turned to Kallek.

‘Thanks,’ he said, but she was down in the dirt with a gaping bloody hole in her stomach where the burst of sub rounds had torn through her.

Cully dropped to his knees beside her. She looked up at him, tears in her eyes.

‘I was... good with a power-loom,’ she whispered, blood running from the corner of her mouth. ‘Remember me.’

And with that she was gone.

Cully stood up and faced Rachain. They were the last ones standing, all that was left of Delaney’s platoon. The two old friends locked eyes.

‘Let’s finish this,’ Cully said.

They took the uplink station an hour later, each of them armed with a Chaos-marked stubber and as much ammunition as they could carry. Two old veterans came calling in the endless night like death walking, and they slaughtered anything that moved until their hands were numb from recoil shock and the barrels of their stubbers were glowing red hot.

They climbed the last stair over a mound of smoking bodies and pushed their way into the vox control room. There was still power there, and the room was lit with glow-globes and the flickering lights of the array of communications gear. Cully went to the control desk and flicked switches, listening as the wail of static died down to something approaching an open band. He turned a dial slowly,

scanning for the HQ channel.

That was when Rachain finally succumbed to the taint within him.

‘They don’t need to know, Cully,’ he said.

He put his gun down and tore the bandage from his left arm, showing Cully the blasphemous mark of Chaos he had carved into the meat of his arm.

‘Baphomet, Cully. It’s special, don’t you see that?’ he went on. ‘Don’t you feel it? Feel the power in the air? Come on, man, cut yourself a mark and join us. Share in the power of the Dark Gods!’

Cully looked at the sergeant, and he felt nothing but disgust. Disgust for the taint of the Ruinous Powers, and what they had done to his friend. Sorrow, too, for Kallek and all the others who had fallen in this vile place.

‘I only answer to one power, Rachain,’ Cully said. ‘The Emperor protects those whose faith is strong.’

He raised his stubber, pointed it at Rachain. They had survived the Vardan campaign together, fighting shoulder to shoulder against the worst the galaxy could throw at them. They had been friends for years, and how many Guardsmen lived long enough to say that?

He swallowed.

She had been good with a power-loom, he remembered, and felt his eyes fill with tears.

Rachain grabbed for his bayonet and made to leap.

‘The Emperor protects,’ Cully said again, and he pulled the trigger.

Cully was a long time alone with Rachain’s corpse.

He voxed HQ, got the warning through to them eventually. It took a long time before he reached someone who would believe him, but in the end he found himself patched through to Colonel Noriego himself. Wyman’s squad were Chaos tainted, he told the colonel, they had to be executed or dragged before the Inquisition at once, wherever they were now. Everyone but him was dead. Beleth was a trap – never mind rebuilding, send a division of Leman Russ battle tanks to flatten it. Please, please, just destroy it all.

The colonel’s voice was understanding, even soothing. A marvellous leader. He would be Warmaster one day, Cully thought.

Yes, they would find and arrest Wyman and her men. Just sit tight, Noriego told him, a Valkyrie was on its way to evacuate him for a thorough debriefing. Just sit tight, corporal.

Cully put the vox handset down and sagged into the operator’s chair.

He drew his bayonet, and rolled up his left sleeve, but he was no artist. Eventually he reached into his shirt and pulled out the old silver aquila he wore around his neck, and laid it on the pale skin of his forearm.

He dug the bayonet into his skin and began to cut around it.

This, he thought, is *my* Mark of Baphomet.

The Emperor protects.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Peter McLean** was born near London in 1972, the son of a bank manager and an English teacher. He went to school in the shadow of Norwich Cathedral where he spent most of his time making up stories. By the time he left school this was probably the thing he was best at, alongside the Taoist kung fu he had been studying since the age of 13. He grew up in the Norwich alternative scene, alternating dingy nightclubs with martial arts and practical magic. He has since grown up a bit, if not a lot, and spent 25 years working in corporate IT. He is married to Diane and is still making up stories. *Baphomet by Night* is his first story for Black Library.

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