

DIGITAL HORROR WEEK 2019 BOOK III



NICK_KYME

STITCHES

A WARHAMMER HORROR SHORT STORY

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STITCHES

By Nick Kyme

Bucher sluiced blood from the slab. Frothing, foaming, runnels spilling this way and that, it took three buckets before the water had turned from pink to clear.

‘Dead...’ he announced to no one in particular, a las-wound to the corpse’s throat leaving no doubt as to the prognosis, and moved to the next slab. Bucher checked his chrono. ‘Twenty-three hundred hours, to the second.’ He shrugged, mildly diverted.

A soldier gaped up at him from the next cot. His eyes widened in hope when he saw the stylised brass caduceus of the Imperial medicae pinned to Bucher’s red-flecked coat. He reached for him, fingers grasping like a drowning man reaches for air, but Bucher deftly stepped away. The man clutched at his chest with his other hand, where a poorly wrapped dressing, dark with blood and other less salubrious fluids, had been bound.

‘This needs to come off,’ Bucher muttered, adjusting the plugs stuffed up his nostrils. Throne, it was rank. Even the waft of watered-down counterseptics couldn’t touch the stench.

Firmly pressing down the man’s flailing arm, Bucher picked up the surgical scissors and began to cut. The bindings were tight and tough; at least a decent corpsman like Renhaus had done a passable job of patching this poor bastard up. As he severed the bandage and gauze, Bucher fancied he recognised this one. Not the name, he never remembered their names, but their parts, their roles. He always remembered that. The pieces. He was good with pieces. A vox-operator, he thought. Young, too. Barely twenty Terran-standard. Barely a man at all. Part of the Valgaast reinforcements sent to bolster the line, judging by the regimental insignia. He didn’t know much about the war, cloistered as he had been in the medicae ever since they had arrived, only that it had been raging for a long time.

If the regular influx of wounded was any barometer, the breakthrough was about to happen anytime soon.

‘Let’s have a look then...’ Bucher murmured, grunting with the effort of cutting at the wrappings. Whatever was beneath had thickened the last layer of bandage, hardening it like a crust. It was like shearing through flakboard. ‘Holy Emperor,’ he breathed, exhaling in relief as he got through it.

Even before he had gingerly pulled the cloth aside, Bucher knew the boy was good as dead. That stench! Throne, but it reeked. Trenchrot had got in. And something else too. It was pupating in the exposed muscle mass, which was visible on account of the missing flesh and bone of his torso.

‘Emperor’s mercy...’ he hissed, recoiling as something beneath the skin caused it to undulate, its passage a steady but slow-moving hump. The body convulsed hard, a heavy slam resonating against the table. Still the writhing persisted under the flesh.

Bucher backed up a step, holding the scissors out in front of him, finding his own fear reflected in the boy’s ever-widening eyes.

The trooper’s voice was a shallow croak. ‘Please...’

‘I can’t help you,’ Bucher rasped. ‘I can’t...’

Another convulsion wracked the boy, sending tremors through the table, and now something was really pushing. Tiny fumaroles opened up in the skin and the gory matter beneath, venting gas and particulate. Bucher didn’t know from what. Transfixed by fear, he pulled up his surgical mask, fingers trembling, a desire to keep out whatever was emerging from the boy’s body surging forth.

Foam bubbled on the boy’s lips. His back arched, his body a bridge between the two short ends of the medical slab. The carotid artery stuck out, thick and livid, in his neck. He was choking, a gelatinous bile bubbling up from his throat. Small, black flecks like frogspawn floated in the mass.

Bucher bumped into the slab behind him, the firmness of the metal and the brush of a cold, dead hand against his skin suddenly focusing his attention.

‘Flamer in here!’ he bellowed. ‘Right bloody now!’

His fingers found the alarm and pulled it hard. Then he scrambled back, eyes locked on the boy, a shuddering, bent-backed, claw-handed image of agony.

‘Holy shitting Emperor... now...’ he whimpered, too afraid to turn his back and using the gurney rail to guide him. He yanked at the alarm until it cracked apart and broke off. He barely took notice of the siren, so fixated was he upon the boy, who turned his head and gave Bucher a look of utter despair.

‘I’m sorry...’ Bucher whispered, so quietly that he couldn’t swear he had

spoken at all.

Three Guardsmen barrelled into the medicae block a few moments later, a sergeant and a two-strong team with a flamer rig.

‘Out, out!’ the officer shouted, seizing Bucher by the shoulder and dragging him back as the flamer team moved up. ‘Torch it!’

An intense roar filled the block, the heat prickling the wiry hairs on Bucher’s chin. Smoke spread everywhere. The wounded were choking on it. A couple of corpsmen had found their way in too and were ferrying out the most able-bodied. The rest burned or suffocated to death. Bucher’s last sight was of the boy’s body wreathed in flame. A smudged brown outline remained, lurching and convulsing. As Bucher was bundled out of the block he heard the very slightest suggestion of a shriek, like air escaping the narrow aperture of a balloon, just audible above the noise of the conflagration.

Bucher returned to the medicae block two days later. It had been thoroughly cleansed, though he could still detect the faint aroma of burning flesh over the chemicals, like pig’s rind and wax. He frowned, eyes narrowing at the rime of mould the ablution servitors had missed. It lurked in the tile grout, obstinate and irritating. He considered using his knife but thought better of it. His patients would probably prefer clean instruments, at least for as long as he was able to keep them that way. He took in the room. Eight fresh slabs, sluice buckets at the ready. He took a drag on a lho-stick pinched between two thin, trembling fingers. The boy’s death... That had been a bad one. One of the worst. But the war drove on, and men needed stitching up and sending back to the line. Rather here with them than out there in the dirt and the horror. Two more drags on the lho-stick and Bucher relaxed. He crushed the stub beneath his boot, sweeping a grimy coat around his narrow frame, and prepared for the slaughter to come.

It didn’t keep him waiting long.

Bodies lay everywhere in varying states of dismemberment. A heavy barrage had rolled up the line, tearing Guardsmen into ruined meat. It had hit the Valgaast worst. Most had died to the enemy ordnance. Those that hadn’t ended up in the medicae block. Bucher didn’t even know what they were fighting for, beyond the love and protection of the Immortal God-Emperor, of course. He had been shipped here like all the rest, assigned to the medicae block and that was it. No sky, no earth, just whitewashed walls, tiles and a poorly stocked refectory. He ate here, slept here, worked here. With the dead. That suited Bucher just fine.

As he cut into the trooper in front of him, Bucher reflected that he badly needed

a win. His episode with the boy had spoiled his already lowly reputation. Even to think on it still made him queasy. He scratched at the back of his neck for the umpteenth time. A rash was growing there from the continued attention. It itched like hell, but hurt to touch now. He had overheard talk recently of shifting him out onto the line and a corpsman like Renhaus being promoted up to *medicae primus*. Elbowing him out.

‘You’d like that, you bastard...’ he muttered, cutting into flesh. It was soft, yielding. It didn’t judge him either. Blood ran almost up to his armpits he was so deep in the chest cavity, trying to tie off a bleed. After considerable effort, Bucher managed to clamp the vein and staunch the flow but the trooper looked pale and weak. He wasn’t breathing too well either, making tiny gasps for air.

Then the breathing stopped altogether.

‘Shit!’

Bucher started compressions, not knowing if it was the bleed or something else that was causing the problem.

‘Come on, come on...’ he urged. ‘I need this.’

After a few minutes he slumped back, exhausted. A blank pair of eyes regarded him from the gurney.

And the dead man wasn’t alone. No one brought into Bucher’s care had lived. Seven dead. He knew he was incompetent, he had just thought he could convince the officers that he wasn’t.

‘They’re going to put me on the line. Holy Throne, they are...’ Trembling, he was reaching for a lho-stick tucked in his top pocket when he heard something rattle against a metal surgical dish. At first he thought it was a survivor and he turned desperately, performing a full three hundred and sixty degree rotation of the room, trying to hook his lifeline.

Nothing. Just dead eyes and slack expressions lathered in blood. But then he heard it again. A wet slap, like something soft hitting something hard.

‘What in the warp...?’

Bucher nosed around, feeling the old fear rising, one hand clasped firmly around a scalpel. The slap came again and this time he found the source, hiding behind the leg of a gurney, discarded and forgotten, a glistening red human lung.

It flopped like a landed fish and Bucher sprang back, reviled and fascinated at the same time.

‘How is this possible?’ he asked aloud. It looked healthy, and, he realised with horror, it breathed. Ever so gently, like it belonged to someone who was sleeping.

He shrank back, immediately disturbed, and reached for the alarm.

Then stopped.

Nothing stirred in the medicae block except for Bucher's shallow breathing and the gentle motion of the lung. He felt a sudden compulsion to pick it up and examine it. Shuffling forwards again, he reached out with tentative fingers, glad for his surgical gloves. It was warm to the touch even through the thin rubber, the slow and impossible susurrations of breath just audible as the lung inflated and deflated. The lobes looked healthy, the main bronchus intact. He regularly harvested the viable body parts from the men he couldn't save and housed them in a secure locker against the medicae wall, each one kept in preservative fluid. There were a lot. Bucher had excised several organs and left them in a surgical dish next to the patient. This one had slipped off the slab somehow. It didn't explain how it was still functioning though.

He regarded the softly pulsing organ in his hand, curious and repulsed all at once. Then he looked at the dead man lying on the gurney. The trooper's body still lay open, its inner heat somehow cooler under the medicae's dull overhead lamps. A thought, an insidious little idea, infiltrated his mind.

Setting the healthy lung down on a fresh surgical dish, Bucher opened the trooper up. His lung looked bad. Punctured and deflated. Bucher wasn't sure how he'd missed it, and then he remembered how he was a poor surgeon and that this was the only explanation needed. Nevertheless, he got to work removing the bad lung and then, with a deftness he had never before displayed or knew he had, he transplanted the healthy lung. Bucher then proceeded to stitch the trooper back up... and waited.

Nothing happened, and the sudden realisation that he was expecting it to pulled Bucher from this moment of insanity.

'What the hell am I doing?' He rubbed his forehead, forgetting he was covered in blood and smearing it over his face. He scowled. 'Damn it!' Shuffling over to the wash basin, he removed his gloves and scrubbed his hands and face, annoyed at making such a stupid error and considering that he might be genuinely losing his mind. He was drinking too much. A nip here and there to steady his frayed nerves had become half a bottle and then a habit.

He stopped the meagre water flow and towelled off his hands and face. Then he leaned against the basin, arms locked and braced, head down.

Something was wrong with him. He wondered if seeing the boy, that horrible, horrible death, had marked him in some way, and it was only now that the effects of that experience were beginning to manifest. Alone and isolated in the medicae

for hours, sometimes days, on end, it was no wonder he was finally going insane. He wondered how long he could go on fooling the others that he was both capable and of sound mind before they caught him and carted him off to the Commissariat or worse.

He exhaled a deep breath, then heard the sound reciprocated a few feet away.

Bucher whirled around, stray water globules studding his face and giving him the appearance of a man in a fever sweat.

The dead trooper's finger twitched – just a last tremor of nerves, Bucher told himself, heart suddenly thumping... But then the corpse shuddered, like a ripple of electricity was rushing through the body. The chest *heaved* and there came a gasp, a definite lurch for air.

The trooper was breathing! Slow at first but with increasing confidence and vigour. He moved again, and Bucher gave an involuntary squeal of shock. Then the man lifted himself up off the slab, stitched up, half-butchered, but alive.

'Medic?' the trooper asked, blinking, a hand slipping down to the roughness of his torso. 'Am I... all right?'

'Y-yes...' stammered Bucher. 'You are, son,' he added more confidently.

'Can I fight?'

Bucher slowly nodded.

'Report to the Munitorum overseer and return to the line...' Bucher caught a glimpse of the ident-tag still hanging around the trooper's neck. 'Gruemann.'

Trooper Gruemann nodded. 'I will, doc.' He swung his legs over the edge of the gurney, barefoot and only wearing the bottom half of his fatigues but brimming with vim and purpose. 'For the Emperor,' he said, throwing a fervent aquila salute Bucher's way as he left the medicae block.

'May He protect,' Bucher replied, still bemused but starting to feel euphoric. He approached the slab to run his finger through the blood. It was dark, thick, arterial.

'Wounds should've killed him.'

That trooper had been dead. He'd seen it with his own eyes. Dead. And now he was back, and more devout and determined to serve the Imperium than ever.

'Am I a living saint?' Bucher asked himself aloud, stopping to marvel at his hands, his miracle-working hands. 'A vessel of the divine Emperor?' He laughed, mildly hysterical, and thought again about his alcohol consumption.

Then he heard something rattling in another surgical dish. Cautiously, but with growing interest, he tracked down the disturbance to a heart. Impossibly it was still beating and separate from its former owner.

There were more bodies in the medicae, cooling but not yet cold.

Bucher looked at his hands again.

A vessel of the divine Emperor.

And then he got to work.

He toiled tirelessly, stitching up the dead, filling them with animated body parts. Lungs, hearts, intestines, every organ gently pulsing in his sainted hands. He had no shortage of supplies. The death toll of the war to that point had been egregious. One by one the men arose, alive, vital and eager for the fight. Seven casualties, torn apart by mortar bombardment with little hope of recovery became seven infantrymen, ready for the meat grinder. Then seven more. And so it went.

Bucher was ebullient. Truly, he had been touched by the Emperor's grace and given a healing gift. None left his care in a corpse-bag now. Every trooper, no matter the severity of their injuries, was patched up and sent back into the fight.

On the third week of this miraculous turnaround, Bucher received a visitor.

'Renhaus?' The sour look on his face said it all as he regarded the corpsman who obviously coveted the medicae's position.

'Doctor Bucher,' said Renhaus, and stepped aside crisply to admit Colonel Rake.

'Sir!'

Both medical men snapped a salute, heels clicking together in the same motion.

Rake waved away the formality. He was a stout man, broad of shoulder, not wiry like Bucher but strong and born into military service. Bucher had never seen him out of his uniform, which was always pristine in the crimson and grey of the Valgaast 66th.

'You're to be commended, Bucher,' Rake began. 'Fine work you're doing here.' The colonel looked around, as if taking in the scene of the medicae's recent triumphs. 'Fine work.'

'Thank you, sir. I serve at the Emperor's grace,' Bucher replied with a short, reverential bow to his commanding officer.

'As do we all, as do we all.' Rake straightened his uniform, his eyes firm as he regarded the medicae. 'You're to receive help, Bucher,' he said, and gestured to Renhaus.

Bucher clenched his jaw so tightly, he almost broke a tooth. His heart drummed so loudly that he feared that Rake would hear it. After a few seconds he dragged out a sentence. 'Sir, that really is unnecessary, I can—'

‘Nonsense, Bucher,’ Rake cut in. ‘You’ve practically patched up half the regiment, man. More even. We’re still in this fight because of you.’

Panic came swift and cold in the wake of Bucher’s anger. He felt suddenly feverish, his head throbbing, a whiny tinnitus forcing his eyes to narrow. Sweat slicked the back of his neck and he scratched at the wound, reopening the scab. The pain brought him to his senses.

‘I... er...’ he garbled, before the ceiling shook. Motes of dust descended earthward like little clouds of minuscule flies. Another mortar barrage had hit, providing a timely reminder of the war Bucher actively wanted to avoid. It was an ever-present companion, the faraway sound of war. Bucher felt it creeping closer. He had not known he was partly responsible for its perpetuation. It was that or death at the hands of the enemy, he supposed.

Rake raised his eyes to the ceiling, scowling. ‘Those heretic bastards are hanging on too. It’s attritional, Bucher,’ he said, fixing the medicae with the rapier point of his gaze. ‘And one thing wins a war of attrition. Men. Blood. Flesh. Bodies, Bucher. Do you understand?’

Bucher nodded dully. ‘Yes, sir, but how does—?’

‘Renhaus will assist you. Whatever you’re doing, teach him to do it too.’

No!

‘Think what you could accomplish with twice the manpower,’ Rake went on. ‘We’ll have this war won in a matter of months.’

‘Months?’ asked Bucher, his gaze flickering to Renhaus, who looked studiously neutral, and then back to Rake, who appeared inordinately pleased with himself.

How can I keep this up for months?

A cold knife of dread slid into Bucher’s back as he suddenly grappled with the full import of what Rake was saying.

In the privacy of his own sanctum, his work had felt divine, righteous, but Renhaus tainted that. Bucher could not risk exposure. His gift might be denied to him, to the men he would otherwise save. He walked a tightrope, and the weight of Rake’s words threatened to unseat him and send him tumbling to oblivion.

‘Sir, I’m sure that the corpsman could be better employed—’

A flash of suppressed anger lit the colonel’s face like a muzzle flare. ‘Are you questioning a direct order, Bucher?’

‘No, sir, of course not, I just believe...’ He didn’t have the will to fight it. That old, spineless wastrel that Bucher knew he was took over again and he crumpled like a broken kite.

‘Very good,’ said Rake. ‘The regiment is making another push at dawn...’ He

checked his chrono. 'That's four hours from now. I expect it to be bloody. You'll be glad of the corpsman's help then.'

'I am ready to assist in any way, doctor,' said Renhaus.

You obsequious little shit...

Bucher felt a sudden urge to bury a scalpel in the corpsman's face and keep churning until he was red and raw and bleed—

He stopped himself. Blood dripped from his clenched fist, the scalpel blade having taken its fill without him realising. He deftly clasped his hands behind his back to hide the wound.

'We should prepare then,' said Bucher, and Rake gave him a curt nod.

'You know,' Rake said, as he was leaving, 'I once thought you were a weak, ineffectual man. I expected to have to throw you back onto the line with the rest of the regiment. But you have proved me wrong.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Bucher, feeling the heat resurge, but Rake had already taken his leave.

He glared at Renhaus, before hurrying to the basin to wash his cut hands and patch them back up.

'Doctor...' The corpsman sounded alarmed as he followed Bucher. 'Are you injured?'

'It's nothing,' said Bucher, running the water over his hands as he caught Renhaus' reflection behind him in the grimy mirror. A crack ran down the glass, cutting the corpsman's mirrored face in two. Bucher imagined smashing his skull repeatedly against the glass until his face collapsed entirely and nothing remained but a gaping red maw and then he'd grind the— Bucher blinked, blood boiling, and took a deep breath.

'You look weary, doctor. Perhaps you should rest. I can take care—'

'I'm fine!' snapped Bucher, then repeated himself more calmly when he saw how pale Renhaus looked. 'I'm fine. Thank you, corpsman.'

Renhaus was young, eager. A thin wash of stubble peppered his skin but it was soft and fair. In the corpsman, Bucher saw everything he wasn't. Competent, hopeful, devout. Bucher saw his replacement.

His tongue felt dry, thick like a wad of cloth. He wanted to be sick. Bucher pushed the feeling down, blaming it on his fatigue. He had barely eaten or slept in the last three weeks, so consumed was he with his work. His gift. A kernel of fear knotted in his gut as he realised there'd be no more of that. He couldn't risk it.

'Patch them up,' said Bucher, still staring at his reflection, wafting a hand

vaguely at the two flesh wounds that had just come in.

‘At once, doctor,’ said Renhaus, moving swiftly to his post. ‘I will prove my worth, I swear it by the Emperor.’

‘May He protect...’ murmured Bucher, and reached for a lho-stick.

The next few days were bloody. Rake’s promised ‘push’ brought fresh wounded by the score and turned the medicae block into a charnel house. The bodies stacked up like sandbags in a defensive redoubt. The stench of death and rot pervaded.

‘Clamp it, Renhaus,’ snapped Bucher, the trooper’s chest cavity filling up like a red well. ‘I can’t see a damn thing in here.’

Renhaus fumbled in the gory morass of the trooper’s innards. Bucher was trying to tie off his stitches, which were slipshod at best, one hand on the needle, the other holding the screaming missile loader down.

‘Throne, Renhaus, will you please—’

‘I’ve got it.’ The corpsman started calmly draining the fluid. ‘You nicked a second artery when you cut him,’ he said.

Bucher glared. Renhaus looked grey, like funeral ash, and dark rings circled his eyes like little pits of darkness.

What do you see? Eh? You think I don’t know what you reckon of me?

Bucher had jabbed a syringe of morphia into the missile loader, and it settled the trooper right down. His chest still moved feverishly, like a scared rodent caught in a trap. No longer needing to hold the patient steady, Bucher stabbed a finger at the corpsman.

‘I did not,’ he said, his voice dangerously level.

‘With respect, doctor—’

‘Now, you listen to me, Renhaus. I run this medicae. Me. Not you. Ever since you got here you’ve been a hindrance. Three days of this, and we’re losing every other soul. That’s one in every two, corpsman. What do you say to that?’

Renhaus only half listened. His attention was on his task, draining the wound, clamping the rogue artery. He only looked up when the rapid chest movements came to an abrupt halt.

‘He’s dead,’ he announced, exhausted, and sagged like a drained waterskin.

Bucher blinked.

‘He’s what?’

Renhaus met his disbelieving gaze. ‘Succumbed to his injuries. They were severe.’ He made the sign of the aquila. ‘Only in death does duty end.’

Bucher looked at the corpse like it was a foreign object. The trooper's eyes were open, flashing like little silver coins of light where the stark overhead lumens touched them. Blood flecked the face, the body cracked open like a broken egg, fluids spilling and slopping over the edge of the slab.

'Is that the last of them?' asked Bucher, a sudden millstone weight around his shoulders.

Renhaus nodded. 'For now, at least.'

A hollow silence fell, where only the breaths of two defeated men and the distant thud of heavy weapons could be heard.

Then... a tiny beat sounded, faint but discernible in the quiet medicae block.

Renhaus squinted, canting his head like a hound that had caught a scent.

'What was that?' he asked, turning to try to pinpoint the noise.

'What was what?' said Bucher, bleary-eyed and slow to make the connection.

Cold ice woke him though. It seized his every nerve ending and thrust him up ramrod straight. 'I don't hear anything,' he said too quickly, too urgently.

He mustn't know. He mustn't know.

'Probably just vermin,' he said, trying to sound casual. 'They get in everywhere.'

'I don't think it's vermin...' Renhaus took a few steps, listened.

Two tiny beats sounded, soft like a child's finger tapping against a window.

Du-dum.

Then again.

Du-dum.

'That definitely wasn't vermin,' said Renhaus, intrepid now, vowing to catch his softly drumming quarry. He gave a side glance to Bucher. 'Can't you hear it?'

'Must be from the guns, an echo in your eardrum perhaps. Here, let me take a...' Bucher reached out but Renhaus had already moved on and was heading for the organ cabinet where the biological material for transplantation was stored.

'Nothing in there but empty, briny jars,' Bucher said, still dissembling, still scrambling.

Since his recent successes, the last three days notwithstanding, he had begun to run out of intact body parts. Not that it mattered with Renhaus watching him like a bloody servo-skull.

The beat came again, a dull thud, an innocuous little noise but hard to deny. It struck Bucher with all the finality of a gunshot.

'There...' said Renhaus. 'You must have heard that?'

Bucher shrugged, opting for nonchalance. ‘This place is always creaking. It’s taken a few hits.’

Renhaus was shaking his head. ‘No...’ he said. ‘No, it’s definitely coming from that cabinet. It sounds like there’s something in there.’ He edged closer, a poacher uncertain of what was in his snare.

Bucher’s expression turned blank, a canvas bled of all its colour.

He knows...

Renhaus had grasped the cabinet’s handle and was opening the door.

‘Be careful...’ said Bucher.

He damn well knows...

He reached for the bone hammer. It felt cold in his grip, but something hot inside him urged him on.

If he sees...

‘Definitely something in here...’ Renhaus was squinting at the darkened interior of the cabinet at the strange, ugly shapes floating in the cloudy liquid inside the jars. Only a few were occupied. One was tapping against the glass, half a heart, its aortic valve enlarging and contracting like a tiny mouth sucking at the wall of the jar. ‘Holy Emperor...’ Renhaus breathed, backing up and making the sign of the aquila. He sounded scared. ‘There is corruption here, there is taint—’

Bucher struck him hard across the back of the head. Renhaus went down like a felled ogryn, bouncing off a gurney rail on his way down to the floor. And there he lay, as still as the dead.

‘Throne, what have I done?’

Bucher nearly fell, slipping on the pool of blood oozing from the corpsman’s cracked skull. He reached out, debating whether he could patch him up. He could claim it was an accident, he could—

Renhaus stirred, half-conscious, face bloody.

Bucher hit him again, crouching in close and swinging the hammer one-handed until the skull came right apart. Then he swung five more times. Gore and brain matter spattered his coat, the medicae walls. He was practically swimming in it by the time he came to his senses. Renhaus barely had a head left. It was just red pulp and bone fragments. Bucher dug a piece out of his face, feeling the sting as he wrenched the skull splinter loose.

‘Oh, shit...’ he gasped, chest heaving, heart thudding louder than the artillery batteries outside. ‘Shit, shit, shit, shit!’

They’d hang him for this or shoot him or worse. Rake would make him suffer.

No way he could spin this. He'd murdered Renhaus, bludgeoned the poor bastard when his back was turned.

He knew though, didn't he. He knew what you'd done.

'Yes... he knew,' Bucher uttered aloud.

He would have exposed you. He would have stopped your healing gift.

'I had no choice...' he said, feeling calmer.

No choice at all.

Bucher swapped the hammer for a surgical saw. He got to work.

The bone was tough. He didn't bother dragging Renhaus onto a slab and just dismembered him on the floor. He cut the narrow joints, the wrist, the elbow, the ankle, the knee. The sheared bone gave off a plaintive shriek. He ignored it, took the partitioned limbs and bisected them. Then he did so again. Kept the pieces small enough to fit. Everything needed to fit. It was hot work and sweat sheathed him in a cloak of body odour and desperation.

'Come on, come on...' he urged himself, the bite of the saw wearing at the web of skin between thumb and forefinger. It began to bleed. 'Come on...'

He kept at it, praying to the Emperor that no one would come, that for now the injured would wait. It took hours, and when he had finished his white coat had turned a ruddy pink. His eyes burned, dry from staring. He needed a drink, but he wasn't done. Not yet. Fingers trembling, he dropped the saw and went for the jars, their preservative fluids sloshing noisily as he took them from the cabinet and lined them up on the medicae floor. He worked hurriedly, unsealing each one, holding his nose against the acerbic bite of the liquid and then dropping Renhaus in piece by ragged piece. He had just about bundled the last jar back into the cabinet and locked it shut when he heard a gentle tap.

Du-dum.

An innocuous sound really. Almost dulcet.

Du-dum.

But it wasn't dulcet. Not soothing at all.

Du-dum.

It gnawed, like nails raking against glass.

Screeeeech!

Bucher stuffed his ears, trying to block it out. Oh, Throne... He could smell the blood on him. They would smell it too. They would know what he had done. Killed a corpsman and then cut him into pieces. Emperor's mercy... that bone shriek.

Du-dum.

‘Shut up...’ Bucher pressed his ears so hard that he grew dizzy from the pressure against his skull. Blood thundering, he let go.

Du-dum.

‘Shut up, shut up...’

He turned on the medical saw and let it whine, scything the air.

Du-dum.

Like a parade inside his head, beating out the tattoo of his guilt.

Du-dum.

‘Shut up!’

Bucher scrambled to his cabinet, slipped and hit his head. Fire burned through his skull, like a dozen hot pins had been thrust into his scalp. He got to his feet, groggy, nauseous.

Screeeeech!

The nails again. His nails. The image of a dismembered hand clawing at the glass filled Bucher’s mind.

‘Please...’ he hissed, a plaintive whisper to the dark. The cabinet sprang open on the third attempt, Bucher’s fingers raw and bleeding with the effort. He threw aside the doors, exposing his tormentor...

The jars were still. Nothing stirred. He waited. He watched. Renhaus, his accumulated biological matter, simply floated. Tiny pieces of him had broken off and bobbed around in the briny fluid. It was murky, like dirty sea water, churning with filth. He checked every jar, holding it up painstakingly to the light, examining the cloudy morass within. Just parts, savaged and separated, but just parts. A foot. A piece of jaw. An eye... Oh, holy Emperor, did I really do this?

Bucher slid to his knees, sloughing down into the gory matter underfoot, a man melting under the weight of his own misdeeds. He let it cling to his clothes, his skin, begging for the filth to consume him.

For a few seconds, there was silence. Then his weary gaze caught sight of that mark again. That little rime of mould, a reminder of the boy, his back arched like a bridge of flesh and bone, the path to his agony and horror. Was it... a little larger than before? No, it had changed though. One patch had become three, a grimy little triangle of dots.

He crawled over for a closer look, and was about to reach out when—

Du-dum.

Bucher sprang to his feet. He had left the cabinet open and grabbed the bone hammer on the way up. Its head was still matted with some of Renhaus’ hair. Roaring, he smashed the jars. Brine and body parts spilled out in a gruesome

flood. He felt it touch him, the soft flesh slapping at his coat, the fingers snagging, the teeth biting. A grisly moat of biological matter and shattered glass separated Bucher from the rest of the medicae block. He laughed, too loud, too hysterically.

‘Now, you’ll shut up...’ he said, a triumphant, mildly unhinged lilt to his voice he didn’t entirely recognise.

There was silence then, blissful silence.

No, wait...

It was actual silence. Not just the empty echoes of the medicae block, but outside too. No bombardment. No dull thud of artillery. It had become so constant that now it was gone Bucher found he missed the percussive refrain of the guns.

Frowning, he carefully edged through the mess he had made. Bits of glass – or was it bone? – crunched under his feet.

He walked out of the block. Still he heard nothing. A long corridor led out to the camp, to the trenches. He took it, still listening, still hearing nothing. Blinking, he stepped out into the light of a cold day. The sky looked ill, jaundice yellow with brown smears of cloud like a dirty rag had been dragged across it with a god’s hand. The regiment were there. They were waiting for him. Silent.

So was the camp. No guns shook the earth with their thunderous recoil. No orders barked back and forth. No one even moved. They stood before him in their ranks, a perversion of parade ground discipline.

They had changed, the Valgaast 66th. Pale skin, sunken eyes and withered limbs. Ragged uniforms blotched by patches of mould in that same pattern he had seen on the medicae wall. He noticed Gruemann, the vox-operator. His arms and legs had wasted to skeletal thinness but his stomach bulged, bloated with putrefaction. Languid flies drifted on air that smelled like fever sweat. It was thick. You swallowed it rather than breathed it. Bucher took a pull and gagged.

Rake came forwards. He shambled, to be precise.

‘S-sir...’ Bucher rasped, fear constricting his throat, or was that just the stench? Rake smelled bad. Like milk left in the sun or eggs turned rotten. The image of flyblown meat surfaced uncomfortably in Bucher’s mind. Then the silence broke and the beat resumed.

Du-dum.

Louder.

Du-dum.

Two dozen hearts beating at the same time. A chorus of lungs heaving ragged

breaths. The pulse and throb of life, except it wasn't life, Bucher knew that now, faced with Colonel Rake in his malodorous state. His shrunken, decaying flesh, his black nubs for teeth. It was un-life or un-death.

It had taken them, some kind of ague.

'It was the boy, wasn't it?' said Bucher, hot tears running down his cheeks.

Rake nodded, opening his mouth to reveal a thick, grey tongue like a slug lolling inside, too fat to fashion speech. Black flecks collected at the corners of his mouth, cracking the skin and releasing tracts of watery pus as he grinned.

'He had the taint. Something in him,' said Bucher. 'It lingered afterwards, after the fire... Emperor's mercy, I did this.'

Rake turned, seemingly uninterested in Bucher's confession. Instead, he gestured with a bony finger to the mists beyond the trenches. They were silent too, but figures were moving inside the miasma, bulky, heavily armoured figures. Poxed men, the dread force they had come to defeat, advancing unhindered. Welcomed. Two armies had become one.

'Silence...' begged Bucher, gritting his teeth against that horrific beat.

Du-dum.

'Please...'

He turned back in time to see Rake's sidearm blur across his vision. Everything went to black.

Bucher awoke. His chest hammered, eyes blinking against a sudden flare of light.

'Sweet merciful Emperor,' he gasped, feeling the softness of his bed beneath him. Then he tried to move his arms and found they were strapped down. The same with his legs. It wasn't his bed. It was a slab.

'No, no... ple--'

A rancid gag stuffed into his mouth choked off his pleas. A cold hand pressed firmly against his forehead. He looked up into Rake's face. The regiment surrounded him on all sides, looking down on him as if he were a specimen to be examined.

A muffled groan escaped Bucher's lips, as he realised the Emperor had forsaken him.

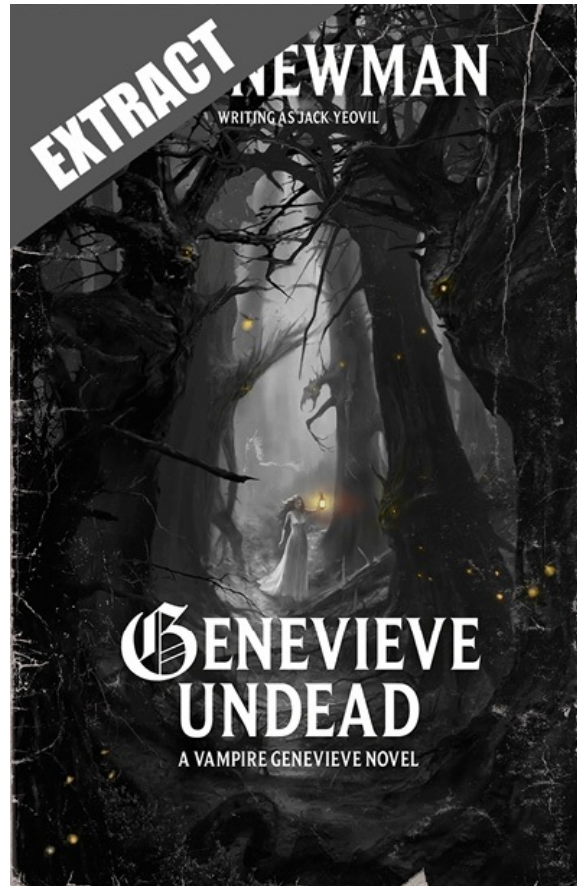
Rake nodded. The dirty scalpel in his hands flashed in the grimy light.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Old Earth*, *Deathfire*, *Vulkan Lives* and *Sons of the Forge*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio dramas *Red-marked*, *Censure* and *Nightfane*.

His novella *Feat of Iron* was a *New York Times* bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Sicarius novels *Damnus* and *Knights of Macragge*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Warhammer Chronicles novel *The Great Betrayal* and the Age of Sigmar story 'Borne by the Storm', included in the novel *War Storm*. More recently he has scripted the Age of Sigmar audio drama *The Imprecations of Daemons*. He lives and works in Nottingham.

An extract from *Genevieve Undead*.



He had a name once, but hadn't heard it spoken in years. Sometimes, it was hard to remember what it had been. Even he thought of himself as the Trapdoor Daemon. When they dared speak of him, that was what the company of the Vargr Breughel called their ghost.

He had been haunting this building for years enough to know its secret by-ways. After springing the catch of the hidden trapdoor, he eased himself into Box Seven, first dangling by strong tentacles, then dropping the last inches to the familiar carpet. Tonight was the premiere of *The Strange History of Dr Zhiexhill and Mr Chaida*, originally by the Kislevite dramatist V.I. Tiodorov, now adapted by the Vargr Breughel's genius-in-residence, Detlef Sierck.

The Trapdoor Daemon knew Tiodorov's hoary melodrama from earlier translations, and wondered how Detlef would bring life back to it. He'd taken an interest in rehearsals, particularly in the progress of his protégée, Eva Savinien, but had deliberately refrained from seeing the piece all through until tonight. When the curtain came down on the fifth act, the ghost would decide whether to give the play his blessing or his curse.

He was recognized as the permanent and non-paying licensee of Box Seven, and he was invoked whenever a production went well or ill. The success of *A Farce of the Fog* was laid to his approval of the comedy, and the disastrous series of accidents that plagued the never-premiered revival of Manfred von - Diehl's *Strange Flower* were also set at his door. Some had glimpsed him, and a good many more fancied they had. A theatre was not a proper theatre without a ghost. And there were always old stage-hands and character actors eager to pass on stories to frighten the little chorines and apprentices who passed through the Vargr Breughel Memorial Playhouse.

Even Detlef Sierck, actor-manager of the Vargr Breughel company, occasionally spoke with affection of him, and continued the custom of previous managements by having an offering placed in Box Seven on the first night of

any production.

Actually, for the ghost things were much improved since Detlef took over the house. When the theatre had been the Beloved of Shallya and specialised in underpatronised but uplifting religious dramas, the offerings had been of incense and a live kid. Now, reflecting an earthier, more popular approach, the offering took the form of a large trencher of meats and vegetables prepared by the skilled company chef, with a couple of bottles of Bretonnian wine thrown in.

The Trapdoor Daemon wondered if Detlef instinctively understood his needs were far more those of a physical being than a disembodied spirit.

Eating was difficult without hands, but the years had forced him to become used to his ruff of muscular appendages, and he was able to work the morsels up from the trencher towards the sucking, beaked hole of his mouth with something approaching dexterity. He had uncorked the first bottle with a quick constriction, and took frequent swigs at a vintage that must have been laid down around the year of his birth. He brushed away that thought – his former life seemed less real now than the fictions which paraded before him every evening – and settled his bulk into the nest of broken chairs and cushions adapted to his shape, awaiting the curtain. He sensed the excitement of the first night crowd and, from the darkness of Box Seven, saw the glitter of jewels and silks down below. A Detlef Sierck premiere was an occasion in Altdorf for the court to come out and parade.

The Trapdoor Daemon understood the Emperor himself was not present – since his experience at the fortress of Drachenfels, Karl-Franz disliked the theatre in general and Detlef Sierck's theatre in particular – but that Prince Luitpold was occupying the Imperial box. Many of the finest and foremost of the Empire would be in the house, as intent on being seen as on seeing the play. The critics were in their corner, quills bristling and inkpots ready. Wealthy merchants packed the stalls, looking up at the assembled courtiers and aristocrats in the circle who, in their turn, looked to the Imperial connections in the private boxes.

A dignified explosion of clapping greeted the orchestra as Felix Hubermann, the conductor, led his musicians in the Imperial national anthem, 'Hail to the House of the Second Wilhelm.' The ghost resisted the impulse to flap his appendages together in a schlumpling approximation of applause. In the Imperial box, the future emperor appeared and graciously accepted the admiration of his future subjects. Prince Luitpold was a handsome boy on the point of becoming a handsome young man. His companion for the evening was handsome too, although the Trapdoor Daemon knew she was not young. Genevieve Dieudonné, dressed far more simply than the brocaded and lace-

swathed Luitpold, appeared to be a girl of some sixteen summers, but it was well-known that Detlef Sierck's mistress was actually in her six hundred and sixty-eighth year.

A heroine of the Empire yet something of an embarrassment, she didn't look entirely comfortable in the Imperial presence, and tried to keep in the shadows while the prince waved to the crowd. Across the auditorium, the ghost caught the sharp glint of red in her eyes, and wondered if her nightsight could pierce the darkness that sweated like squid's ink from his pores. If the vampire girl saw him, she didn't betray anything. She was probably too nervous of her position to pay any attention to him. Heroine or not, a vampire's position in human society is precarious. Too many remembered the centuries Kislev suffered under Tsarina Kattarin.

Also in the Prince's party was Mornan Tybalt, grey-faced and self-made keeper of the Imperial counting house, and Graf Rudiger von Unheimlich, hard-hearted and forceful patron of the League of Karl-Franz, a to-the-death defender of aristocratic privilege. They were known to hate each other with a poisonous fervour, the upstart Tybalt having the temerity to believe that ability and intellect were more important qualifications for high office than breeding, lineage and a title, while the pure-blooded huntsman von Unheimlich maintained that all Tybalt's policies had brought to the Empire was riot and upheaval. The Trapdoor Daemon fancied that neither the Chancellor nor the Graf would have much attention for the play, each fuming at the imperially-ordained need not to attempt physical violence upon the other in the course of the evening.

The house settled, and the prince took his chair. It was time for the drama. The ghost adjusted his position, and fixed his attention on the opening curtains. Beyond the red velvet was darkness. Hubermann held a flute to his lips, and played a strange, high melody. Then the limelights flared, and the audience was transported to another century, another country.

The action of *Dr Zhiekhill and Mr Chaida* was set in pre-Kattarin Kislev, and concerned a humble cleric of Shallya who, under the influence of a magic potion, transforms into another person entirely, a prodigy of evil. In the first scene, Zhiekhill was debating good and evil with his philosopher brother, as the darkness gathered outside the temple, seeping in between the stately columns.

It was easy to see what attracted Detlef Sierck, as adaptor and actor, to the Tiodorov story. The dual role was a challenge beyond anything the performer had done before. And the subject was an obvious development of the macabre vein that had been creeping lately into the playwright's work. Even the comedy

of *A Farce of the Fog* had found room for a throat-slitting imp and much talk of the hypocrisy of supposedly good men. Critics traced Detlef's dark obsessions back to the famously interrupted premiere of his work *Drachenfels*, during which the actor had faced and bested not a stage monster but the Great Enchanter himself, Constant Drachenfels. Detlef had tackled that experience face-on in *The Treachery of Oswald*, in which he had taken the role of the possessed Laszlo Lowenstein, and now he was returning to the hurt inside him, nagging again at the themes of duality, treachery and the existence of a monstrous world underneath the ordinary.

His brother gone, Zhiekhill was locked up in his chapel, fussing with the bubbling liquids that combined to make his potion. Detlef, intent on delaying the expected, was playing the scene with a comic touch, as if Zhiekhill weren't quite aware what he was doing. In his recent works, Detlef's view of evil was changing, as if he were coming to believe it was not an external thing, like Drachenfels usurping the body of Lowenstein, but a canker that came from within, like the treachery forming in the heart of Oswald, or the murderous, lecherous, spiteful Chaida straining to escape from the confines of the pious, devout, kindly Zhiekhill.

On the stage, the potion was ready. Detlef-as-Zhiekhill drained it, and Hubermann's eerie tune began again as the influence of the magic took hold. *Dr Zhiekhill and Mr Chaida* forced the Trapdoor Daemon to consider things he would rather forget. As Chaida first appeared, with Detlef performing marvels of stage magic and facial contortion to suggest the violent transformation, he remembered his own former shape, and the Tzeentch-born changes that slowly overcame him. When, at the point Detlef-as-Chaida was strangling Zhiekhill's brother, the monster was pulled back inside the cleric and Zhiekhill, chastened and shaking, stood revealed before the philosopher, the ghost was slapped by the realization that this would never happen to him. Zhiekhill and Chaida might be in an eternal struggle, neither ever gaining complete control, but he was forever and for good or ill the Trapdoor Daemon. He would never revert to his old self.

Then the drama caught him again, and he was tugged from his own thoughts, gripped by the way Detlef retold the tale. In Tiodorov, the two sides of the protagonist were reflected by the two women associated with them, Zhiekhill with his virtuous wife and Chaida with a brazen slut of the streets. Detlef had taken this tired cliché and replaced the stick figures with human beings.

Sonja Zhiekhill, played by Illona Horvathy, was a restless, passionate woman, bored enough with her husband to take a young cossack as a lover and attracted,

despite herself, to the twisted and dangerous Mr Chaida. While Nita, the harlot, was played by Eva Savinien as a lost child, willing to endure the brutal treatment of Chaida because the monster at least pays her some attention.

The murder scene drew gasps from the auditorium, and the ghost knew Detlef would, in order to increase the clamour for tickets, spread around a rumour that ladies fainted by the dozen. While Detlef's Chaida might be a triumph of the stage, the most chilling depiction of pure evil he had ever seen, there was no doubt that the revelation of the play was Eva Savinien's tragic Nita. In *A Farce of the Fog*, Eva had taken and transformed the dullest of parts – the faithful maidservant – and this was her first chance to graduate to anything like a leading role. Eva's glowing performance made the ghost's chest swell wet with pride, for she was currently his special interest.

Noticing her when she first came to the company, he had exerted his influence to help her along. Eva's triumph was also his. Her Nita quite outshone Illona Horvathy's higher-billed heroine, and the Trapdoor Daemon wondered whether there was anything of Genevieve Dieudonné in Detlef's writing of the part.

The scene was the low dive behind the temple of Shallya, where Chaida makes his lodging, and Chaida was trying to get rid of Nita. Earlier, he had arranged an assignation here with Sonja, believing his seduction of the wife he still believes virtuous will signify an utter triumph over the Zhiexhill half of his soul. The argument that led to murder was over the pettiest of things, a pair of shoes without which Nita refuses to go out into the snow-thick streets of Kislev. Gradually, a little fire came into Nita's complaints and, for the first time, she tried to stand up to her brutish protector. Finally, almost as an afterthought, Chaida struck the girl down with a mailed glove, landing a blow of such force that a splash of blood erupted from her skull like juice from a crushed orange.

Stage blood flew.

Click here to buy [Genevieve Undead](#).

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