

DIGITAL HORROR WEEK 2019 BOOK VII



PETER MCLEAN

BLOOD SACRIFICE

A WARHAMMER HORROR SHORT STORY

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BLOOD SACRIFICE

by Peter McLean

After Baphomet, he was redeployed. There's no respite in the Astra Militarum, no end to the killing. Not ever.

Death and death and death, the unofficial mantra of the Imperial Guard.

Corporal Cully looked out over the relentless grey of the out-habs, and sighed. Behind him, the main spine of Hive Lemegeton reared majestically into the clouds, but Hive World Voltoth remained one of the most depressing places he had ever seen in his life.

Below the chunk of broken ferrocrete he stood on, One Section dug latrine pits. He caught Steeleye looking up at him. The master sniper's bulbous, augmented eye glinted metallically in the polluted twilight before she turned away. Above them, a huge hololithic display flickered with daily production targets, hourly quotas, shift rotation patterns.

'Toil in the Emperor's name is a virtue!' the public address system announced. 'Sixteen cubic tons of further production required by nineteen hundred hours. Toil in the Emperor's name is a virtue!'

Cully glanced at his chrono. It was seventeen forty-five, local time. On the manufactorum wall was a mural showing handsome, square-jawed Imperial men and women marching proudly off to war in starched uniforms with freshly stamped lasguns over their shoulders. The caption below read: 'Their lives are in YOUR hands.'

Hive worlds like Voltoth kept the war machine turning. Cully knew that. Boots, uniforms, flak armour, ration packs. It all had to come from somewhere. The forge worlds turned out tanks and troop ships – but you couldn't wear those, or eat them. The hives kept the Imperium alive.

They had been there for three months, digging in. Cully was utterly sick of the

place. The waiting was the worst. Give him something to kill and he'd be as good as he got, but the waiting was wearing Cully's nerves to ragged ends.

Away behind him a klaxon blew three long blasts, signifying shift change at another manufactorum. The line of workers waiting to enter stretched the length of the street, all of them bent and hungry-looking in their thin, grey work smocks.

Great doors banged open and the workers trudged inside in double file as the manufactorum excreted the previous shift from another set. From inside, Cully could hear the ceaseless chatter of the power looms.

'Notice of production quota increase,' the public address system blared. 'Overseers to your stations. Toil in the Emperor's name is a virtue!'

Cully shuddered. This life was exactly what he had hoped to avoid in the Astra Militarum.

He was aware of Steeleye climbing up the ferrocrete to join him, an entrenching tool over her shoulder where in any sane world her long-las would have been.

She paused at the top to spit snot out of the ragged hole where her nose had been before an ork had bitten her face off two years ago, on Vardan IV. That done, she turned to survey the industrial wasteland of smoking manufactoria and crumbling, impoverished dwellings that made up the out-habs.

'Shithole,' she pronounced it. 'I almost miss Vardan Four. At least the jungle was green.'

'It's better than Baphomet,' Cully said quietly.

Steeleye shrugged. 'Wasn't there,' she said.

'Lucky you.'

'Sorry,' Steeleye said. 'I know you were the only survivor. The sergeant...'

'Leave it, Steeleye,' Cully said.

He scratched at the scar on the back of his left forearm, the crude aquila he had carved into his raw flesh with his own bayonet in a moment of post-traumatic madness.

The sergeant, indeed. All Cully's woes could be condensed into those two words.

The sergeant.

Sergeant Rachain, Cully's oldest and only real friend, and the best mentor he'd ever had. Cully had killed him himself, on Baphomet. He knew he would never be able to forgive himself for that.

The sergeant.

Sergeant Kallin, Cully's new leader. Kallin was a tough veteran but he had a

bayonet so far up his arse he could taste steel when he coughed. Kallin, who had the best sniper in the entire Reslian 45th digging latrine pits because paragraph six hundred and ninety-four, clause sixteen, sub-clause eleven in the regulations, or whatever it bloody was, declared that fair rotation of fatigue duties applied to everyone regardless of enlisted rank, merit, or having better sodding things to do.

Cully and Kallin, it was fair to say, were never going to get along.

‘Why are we digging in this far behind the perimeter?’ Steeleye asked. ‘There’s miles of out-habs beyond where we’re preparing a front line.’

‘Too many miles,’ Cully said, ‘and not enough of us to hold them. The main spire is the important thing. You know, where the rich folk live. We just need to hold that, and we need to be *seen* to be holding it. They’re starting to panic already up there, so I hear.’

‘All those workers,’ Steeleye said, gesturing at the manufactoria. ‘Knowing their homes will be abandoned to the enemy when the ork warband arrives, knowing they’re going to lose everything. Working anyway, day in and day out.’

Cully shrugged.

‘They want to eat,’ he said. ‘No production, no rations.’

Steeleye wiped her oozing, ragged snout on the back of her already crusty sleeve.

‘Makes you appreciate life in the Guard,’ she said.

Cully just nodded.

‘We’re the lucky ones,’ he said.

He meant it, but he swallowed all the same. Orks again. They had faced orks on Vardan IV. For three long, grinding years of misery they had fought the greenskins in the reeking jungles, and left over two million of their own dead or missing in action. Now they would face them again.

We’re the Imperial Guard. Dying is what we’re for. Cully had used to tell the new boots that, back on Vardan IV, to spook them. He had thought it was funny at the time, right up until he realised that it was true.

Dying is what soldiers are *for*.

Death and death and death.

Cully sat down and lit a lho-stick, resting his back on the wall behind him. It was painted with the mural of a proud Guardsman rearing up to hurl a grenade at an unseen enemy. The caption above read: ‘Emperor help me if this is a dud.’ Below, the ever-repeated slogan: ‘His life is in YOUR hands.’

There are only so many times a man can push his luck, Cully reflected. Only so

many battles he can survive. Cully had been in the Guard for nearly twenty years, and he wondered just how much luck he had left.

Being forced to kill Rachain had all but finished him, he knew. With the older man at his side Cully had felt invincible. A survivor. An avatar of the Imperial war machine. Without him, he was just a soldier like any other, and he knew how long *they* lived.

‘We should be grateful,’ Steeleye said after a moment. ‘Without these people, their work, we couldn’t fight.’

‘I know,’ Cully said.

I was good with a power loom. Remember me.

Cully blinked back a tear and took a drag of his lho. Memories of Baphomet were the last thing he wanted just now. Memories of anything. All Cully wanted was something to kill, something to hurt to take his own pain away if only for a little while.

‘Corporal!’ an all-too familiar voice barked. ‘Put that out! No smoking on duty.’

Cully mashed his lho angrily into the ground and made himself stand up and salute, aware of Steeleye doing the same beside him.

‘Yes, sergeant,’ Cully said.

Sergeant Kallin glared at them both, his regulation helmet perfectly set atop his regulation haircut, and his regulation blue eyes shining bright beneath its brim.

‘Why aren’t you working, trooper?’ he demanded.

‘Latrines are done,’ Steeleye growled. ‘Sergeant.’

‘Then find something else to do,’ Kallin snapped. ‘Corporal, detail your section to inspect the ammunition dump. I want every power pack and grenade logged in triplicate and checked against the Munitorum manifest. Jump to it! The enemy makes work for idle hands.’

Kallin turned on his heel and marched away at a regulation pace as the public address system once again intoned that toil in the Emperor’s name was a virtue.

‘His family own a garment manufactorum back home, so I heard,’ Steeleye said.

‘You don’t say,’ Cully said.

At twenty-one hundred hours local they were rotated off fatigues at last and sent back to camp. D Company’s billet was a series of empty storage sheds that crouched in the filth beside the great engines that drove the hive’s eastern spire elevators. It was never quiet, and the air reeked of promethium exhaust night and

day.

Cully took his helmet off and tossed it onto his bunk, and sat down with a sigh.

‘Inspect the ammunition dump, Corporal Cully,’ he muttered. ‘Log it in triplicate, Corporal Cully. Paint the engine grease white, Corporal Cully. The sergeant makes work for idle hands, Corporal Cully.’

He lit a lho and blew smoke angrily into the tin cup of thick, oily recaff he had snagged on his way through the camp. Everyone else said the stuff was horrible, but Cully had found a new appreciation for Guard-issue rations since Baphomet. A man who has known thirst and starvation is grateful for any sustenance, he supposed.

‘Talking to yourself again, Cully?’ Corporal Lopata asked.

He was a huge man, prodigiously strong, and regimental legend had it that he had been an enforcer for some big-time ganger back home before he joined the Guard. It was said he had killed an ork in single combat on Vardan IV. Cully wouldn’t have believed that if Varus hadn’t been there to see it with her own eyes, but she had and he trusted the veteran scout more than anyone in D Company except for Steeleye, so he supposed it must be true.

‘Don’t mind me, Lopata,’ Cully said. ‘Just having a grumble about sergeants. That’s a corporal’s prerogative, that is.’

Lopata snorted and lit a lho of his own. He had good ones, Cully noticed, not the ration-issue smokes that were as likely as not to fall apart in your hand before you could even light them. Lopata always seemed to have good kit, and if you wanted some extra sacra or more smokes or whatever then he was the man to go and see about it. Every regiment had its black market man and has done since armies were invented. Cully knew that and he turned a blind eye to it. Kallin wouldn’t, though.

‘Don’t flash those around where the sergeant can see,’ he cautioned. ‘He’s the sort to have you up in front of the commissar for racketeering.’

Lopata laughed.

‘They’re only lhos,’ he said, but he tucked the pack away inside his uniform all the same.

‘Where did you get those, anyway? You didn’t have any left when we were on the troop ship.’

‘I met a guy,’ Lopata said, with an expressive shrug.

‘You always *meet a guy*,’ Cully said. ‘Nice skill to have.’

Lopata looked at the other corporal for a moment, his brow furrowing in thought.

‘You want in on something?’ he asked after a moment.

Cully coughed to cover his surprise. He and Lopata had been in different platoons back on Vardan IV and he had only vaguely known the man then, and even since they had been in the same unit they hadn’t had more than a professional relationship.

‘Maybe,’ Cully said, after a moment. ‘Why me?’

‘You don’t like Kallin any more than I do,’ Lopata said. ‘People like him are bad for business, but I reckon old Cully knows which way is up.’

‘What is it?’ Cully asked.

‘Just a pickup,’ Lopata said. ‘This guy I met, he’s got a drop coming down right on the edge of the out-habs. He wants something collecting and bringing back to the spire, that’s all, but the out-habs aren’t too safe at the moment with all the security pulled back behind the new front line. He saw all these bored soldiers hanging around and reckoned we might like an early payday. Varus is already in, and I’m talking to Steeleye and a couple of the others as well. It’s easy money, Cully.’

‘We’d have to be bloody careful,’ Cully said. ‘Make sure we get there and back while we’re scheduled to be off watch. The commissar is all over the attendance rolls since Sharrik and Ells deserted. I’m not risking her bolter up my arse however good a payday it is.’

Sharrik and Ells, that had been bad. They were both veterans, tough men who had been through Vardan IV the same as the rest of them. Why they had chosen to desert shortly after the regiment made planetfall on Voltoth was a mystery, but Cully supposed that if you were going to cut and run then a hive world was the place to do it. It would be easy enough to lose yourself amongst the vast population of a hive, but how they thought they were going to live after that was beyond him. Still, they weren’t from his section so it wasn’t his problem, and thank the Emperor for small mercies.

‘It’ll be fine,’ Lopata assured him. ‘We’re making the pickup from an abandoned community medicae facility in quadrant nine. That’s only five miles out, we can easily do it in an overnight watch even on foot.’

Cully nodded. They would never get away with ‘borrowing’ a halftrack when they were off watch, not in Kallin’s platoon, and Lopata had obviously realised that. He ground his lho out on the dirty rockcrete floor and nodded.

It was better than the endless waiting, and the relentless horror of his memories.

‘Yeah, we can do that,’ he said.

‘So you’re in?’

‘I’m in,’ Cully said.

What was the worst that could happen?

Dying is what we’re for.

It was two days until their next overnight off watch, and Cully spent that time counting things that didn’t need to be counted and making his men polish things that didn’t need to be polished and got almost instantly dirty again anyway. His simmering resentment continued to grow, and every time he so much as saw Sergeant Kallin he grew more convinced he had been right to throw his lot in with Lopata. This make-work was all just so *pointless*; he might as well use the time for himself while he had the chance. Emperor knew he couldn’t rest at nights anyway. Nightmares of Baphomet tortured him through every sleep cycle, until he was glad to wake and work just to put an end to them. The orks would be there soon enough, and then there would be no time for anything but killing and dying.

They met at the edge of camp at twenty-two hundred, him and Lopata, Steeleye and Varus and the four other men Lopata had talked into coming with them. They wore full combat battledress, and all of them had their weapons with them. Steeleye had her specially customised hotshot long-las over her shoulder, where it should be, and Strongarm had his bandolier of grenades. Lopata raised an eyebrow at that.

‘We’re not going into battle, man,’ he said.

Strongarm just shrugged. ‘Better safe than sorry,’ he said.

‘Whatever,’ Lopata muttered. ‘Right, we’ve got eight hours until we’re due back on watch, local standard. Let’s get marching.’

Cully fell in beside his fellow corporal as they headed out of camp and along the cracked ferrocrete road that led into the out-habs. There was a Guard checkpoint there, but in their full battledress they looked so much like an official patrol that they were waved through with no questions.

Discipline was getting lax, Cully thought.

If Kallin had been half the sergeant that Rachain had been then he’d have been worrying about things like that, not whether the latrines had been polished today, but he wasn’t and that was all there was to it. Cully lazily saluted the trooper on watch and made a mental note to kick his arse when they got back.

The streets were shadowed, but it never really got dark on a hive world. The manufactoria ran around the clock, and the glow from the millions of windows in the towering main spire illuminated the out-habs for miles in every direction.

The Reslian 45th were infantry to the core, and their marching pace ate up the five miles to quadrant nine in barely an hour.

They gathered under a buzzing orange street light, just a caged bulb bolted to a crumbling wall adorned with a mural of a hard-eyed Imperial Guardswoman, her stern face unrealistically devoid of scars.

The caption above read: ‘She fights the enemies of the Imperium. Don’t let her fight alone!’

Below, a pitted brass arrow pointed towards a long-abandoned tithing station with the words ‘Join the Astra Militarum today’ spray-painted over in blood-red graffiti with ‘To Valgaast, nine miles.’

Steeleye looked up at the mural and slowly shook her ruined, lopsided head. The medicae corps had put her back together again as best they could, back on Vardan IV, but her skull had been half crushed and her eyes torn out along with her nose, and there was only so much that could be done with augmetics and synth-skin.

Varus sneered at the mural for a moment, but said nothing.

The bezel in Steeleye’s single augmetic eye clicked as it rotated to switch to night vision and scan the deepening shadows. This close to the edge of the out-habs the light was bad, and some of the narrow alleys between the long rows of hab blocks could have concealed anything.

‘Which way?’ Cully asked.

Lopata consulted his map and compass for a moment before pointing east.

‘Down there,’ he said. ‘Look for an old medicae facility. Varus, take the point.’

The veteran scout nodded and slipped away into the shadows, silent as a ghost. They followed a moment later, lasguns in their hands. There was an unspoken understanding between them that gangers weren’t necessarily the most trustworthy of the citizens of the Imperium, and also that the weapons and equipment they carried had a significant black market value. It was best to be careful.

Varus voxed back a moment later, her voice soft in the beads in Cully and Lopata’s ears. Steeleye had one too, but Cully didn’t think she had activated it yet.

‘I see it,’ the scout reported. *‘Three hundred on the nine, end of the street. Looks half derelict.’*

‘Yeah, that’s what my guy said,’ Lopata said. ‘Sounds like the place.’

Cully turned to Steeleye.

‘Find a roof, cover the entrance,’ he told the sniper. ‘And switch your vox on.’

Report when you're in position.'

She just nodded and followed her orders, vanishing silently into the shadows. Vardan IV had been hell, but it had taught them skills that most Guardsmen simply didn't have.

'How much do you trust your guy?' Cully asked Lopata. 'Really, I mean.'

'I don't trust anyone outside the regiment,' Lopata said. 'Still, I think this is on the level.'

Cully grunted and waited in cover behind a low wall until the vox-bead crackled in his ear.

'Steeleye, in position.'

He tapped his bead in acknowledgement and gave Lopata the nod.

The two of them moved together, sweeping the deserted street with their lasguns as the rest of their squad formed up behind them, Strongarm and Tarran, Merrith and Esannason, all with their weapons raised to their shoulders as they moved. Varus was two hundred yards ahead of them and she stayed out of sight until they passed her position, then leapfrogged ahead once more until she was within throwing distance of the main entrance. She had a frag grenade in her hand, Cully noticed, just in case.

Better safe than sorry, he thought bitterly.

Vardan IV had been a harsh teacher indeed.

'Looks clear,' Varus reported over the vox, her voice a low whisper. *'No movement.'*

Cully nodded and led the other five towards her position, with Strongarm right behind him and Lopata on rearguard duty. Somewhere, and he had no idea where, Steeleye would have her long-las dialled in on the shadowy entrance of the abandoned medicae facility.

The single caged bulb over the entrance was flickering like a dying ember, making the shadows twitch and jump. At least it told him the place still had power. Cully gave a hand signal and Varus rose out of cover and crossed the fifty yards to the pitted, brown-stained steel doors in a low crouch. She pushed the left-hand door and Cully winced as it swung open with a rusty scream of unoiled hinges.

Varus flattened herself to the wall with her lasgun tight to her shoulder, but nothing happened.

A moment later she stepped inside.

'Clear,' she voxed back, and Cully felt himself relax slightly as he led the squad after her.

The corridor inside was in near darkness, lit only by a flickering glowstrip in the tiled ceiling maybe twenty yards away. There was an abandoned hospital gurney against the wall, its once-white paint peeling to expose ancient rust below. This place had obviously been disused for a long time, Cully thought. Somewhere in the distance he could hear water dripping from a broken pipe. He turned and looked a question at Lopata.

The big man shrugged.

‘Pickup for Bastian DeMarr,’ he called out. *‘Dulce et decorum est pro Imperator mori.’*

High Gothic had never been Cully’s strong point. ‘What’s that mean?’

Apparently it wasn’t Lopata’s strong point either.

‘No idea. Some devotion to the Emperor, I suppose. It’s the code phrase for the pickup.’

‘Oh.’

Cully cocked his head, listening. He could hear footsteps approaching, one leg dragging with each step as though whoever it was were injured, or crippled.

‘Here he comes,’ he said.

‘About time,’ Lopata muttered.

A hunched figure emerged in the shadows beyond the buzzing glowstrip, dragging its right leg and walking with a pronounced lurch. There was something wrong with its left arm too, but Cully couldn’t make out what it was.

‘Pickup for Bastian DeMarr,’ Lopata called out again. ‘Are you Klassian?’

The figure started to lurch faster towards them. As it passed under the glowstrip Cully saw it was wearing a tattered white smock with the red aquila of his regiment’s medicae corps stencilled on it. It was bald, and the skin of its peeling scalp showed a pallid grey in the fitful light.

‘What the—’ Varus began. The thing raised its left arm.

Not an arm – an articulated servo-manipulator that ended in a cluster of long, filthy needles where the hand should have been.

‘Nuuuurrse,’ it rumbled.

‘I don’t like this,’ Cully whispered, his hands tightening on his lasgun.

‘It’s a servitor,’ Varus said.

‘Not my guy, not my problem,’ Lopata said, and raised his lasgun to his shoulder.

He put a three-round burst into the chest of the advancing monstrosity. That, Cully realised a second too late, was a bad idea.

‘Nuuuuuurrrrse!’ it roared, and charged them with its fist of needles raised to

plunge into the first person it could reach.

‘Fire!’ Cully ordered.

The wall beside him exploded into fragments as something crashed through it.

Cully was thrown backwards by the force of the impact, and a huge shape tore into the abandoned gurney with a shriek of grinding gears. The light flickered sickeningly as the thing ripped its way through the wall, a hunched and lumbering nightmare of heavy augmetics and withered, greyish flesh that screamed as it came on. It too wore a stained and rotting medicae smock, with the word ‘psychiatric’ stencilled across it. Lopata turned and put a burst of full-auto into it before it lashed out with the heavy restraint grips that made up its left arm and dashed him to the floor.

‘Kill, kill, kill!’ Varus shouted, her lasgun cracking in her hands.

The las-bolts flashed and sparked off the monstrosity’s built-in armour, and it turned its plated back on the scout as the huge amputational chain scalpel where its right arm had been spun up with a howl.

‘Nuuuuuurrrrse!’ it howled. Behind it the other stabbed with its needles and missed Strongarm by a whisper.

The huge thing lunged at Trooper Tarran from Lopata’s section and rammed the monstrous scalpel through the man’s flak armour and into his chest. A whirlwind of blood sprayed from the hapless trooper as the heavy instrument punched straight through him and out of his back.

‘Retreat!’ Cully roared, his lasgun barking even as he moved. ‘Draw them outside!’

Trying to fight the maddened medicae servitors at close quarters was suicide and he knew it. Out in the street they could cut them apart with their weapons, but at this range...

Trooper Merrith shrieked as the huge psychiatric servitor’s restraint grips caught him around the leg and dragged him back. Lopata moved to go after him but Cully grabbed his arm.

‘Don’t be a fool,’ he snarled.

The servitor stomped a huge metal foot down on Merrith’s chest and ripped his leg off as if it were pulling a ration bar in half. Merrith’s screams echoed in the corridor as Cully ran for the entrance with his squad on his heels. The servitors came lumbering after them, the larger of the pair drenched in gore and with its chain scalpel roaring.

‘Steeleye!’ Cully shouted into his vox. ‘Company incoming! Two targets!’

Steeleye tapped her bead in acknowledgement. Cully could imagine her lying

prone on some filth-stained flat roof, her view of the world narrowed to the unwavering point between her crosshairs. He needed to get the servitors into that point, and not lose any more men doing it. They burst through the doors and into the gloom of the street with the monstrosities barely yards behind them.

‘Scatter!’ Cully yelled.

Troopers went in all directions and Cully turned and ran backwards from the entrance, shooting on full-auto as he went. The huge psychiatric servitor crashed through the doors behind him, chunks of metal and dead flesh flying from its hideously twisted body but not slowing, relentless in its pursuit. Behind it the other followed, the rhythmic dragging of its crippled leg making Cully’s nerves scream.

There was a searing flash as Steeleye unleashed the killing power of her long-las with a bellow like furious thunder. The full-charge hotshot blew half the psychiatric servitor’s head away.

It kept coming.

‘*Reloading,*’ Steeleye said over the vox.

The servitor raised its screaming chain scalpel and roared with fury.

‘Nuuuuuuuuuuurrrrrse!’

Cully turned and ran for his life.

‘Cover!’ Strongarm yelled as he reared up and hurled a krak grenade.

Cully threw himself over a broken wall and rolled with the impact, flattening himself on the ground with his hands over his head. The high explosive grenade detonated between the two horrors with a tremendous blast and Steeleye put another two hotshots into what was left, and silence fell.

‘Emperor’s sake, what have I got myself into?’ Cully muttered as he got up and dusted himself off, and turned to look at the damage.

Dying is what soldiers are for.

The krak grenade had left a shallow, smoking crater in the ferrocrete street, the ground around it streaked with gore and strewn with bits of shattered metal. Even so the shapes of the servitors were still discernible, carapaces cracked open and the withered organs and broken spinal cords inside horribly recognisable. Cully had never cared for the man-machine creations of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and seeing the reeking insides of them was enough to remind him why.

Cully rounded on Lopata.

‘I take it *your guy* didn’t mention this?’

Lopata shook his head grimly. ‘When I get hold of him... Come on, we’re still

doing the thing.’

‘You honestly think whoever we were supposed to be meeting in there is still alive, with *those* things on the loose?’

‘Honestly, no,’ Lopata confessed, ‘but I need to at least check. We’re the fearless Astra Militarum, remember? This is what he hired us for.’

Varus joined them, and Cully voxed Steeleye to come down from wherever she was hidden.

‘Why did they attack us?’ the scout asked. ‘These things are supposed to be docile, aren’t they?’

‘Malfunction, I suppose,’ Cully said. ‘There’s no saying how long they’ve been here. Abandoned, like everything else.’

Varus frowned at that, but said nothing.

Steeleye joined them a few minutes later, and Cully led her and Lopata, Varus and Esannason and Strongarm back into the facility. The hallway was drenched with gore where Merrith had bled out on the ground. The glowstrip down the corridor continued to buzz and flicker unsteadily.

‘Which way?’ Cully asked the big man.

Lopata shrugged. ‘Don’t know,’ he said. ‘My contact was supposed to be right here.’

‘Well, he isn’t,’ Varus snapped.

‘We’ll sweep the ground floor and give it up for dead if we don’t find him,’ Lopata decided.

Cully grunted in agreement and took the point, heading down the long corridor towards the buzzing glowstrip. He thought he could hear something else now, too. He frowned and took another few steps, trying to shut out the noise of the light so he could concentrate on the other sound. It was faint, but... yes. There.

‘I hear someone,’ he said.

A human voice, crying out in pain. Varus joined him and cocked her head, listening.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘Someone screaming.’

Their eyes met for a moment as they exchanged a look. *This can’t be good*, that look said.

‘Is this really our problem?’ Varus whispered. ‘We’re not even on watch.’

‘That’s an Imperial citizen, Varus,’ Cully said. ‘The Emperor protects, and we are the mortal instruments of the Emperor on Voltoth. This is what we’re *for*.’

Dying is what soldiers are for.

He wiped his hands on the trousers of his battledress, feeling the sick sweat of

dread and the creeping thought that he had reached the end of the line at last. *Shut up, Cully. Just shut up and work.*

‘Too right,’ Lopata said, but there was a haunted look in his eyes as he said it.

Cully thought the big man probably had some regrets of his own to deal with, but that was Lopata’s business and nothing to do with him.

‘Come on. Let’s go to work.’

Lasguns at the ready, they walked on into the flickering darkness across a floor of cracked tiles, littered with stained bandages. The dripping noise intensified, until they rounded a corner and found a hole in the ceiling where the tiles had collapsed under the weight of leaking water. The ruptured pipe bulged overhead like a cirrhotic artery, and brackish, brown water fell to pool on the floor below, drop after drop after drop.

Not brown, Cully realised. Dark red, like the outflow from a surgical drain.

‘I think there’s someone still working here,’ he whispered.

Lopata nodded. ‘Then we go up.’

They found the stairs and ascended, breathing through their mouths to block the ammonia stench of stale urine that clung to the concrete stairwell like a rotting shroud. The walls were dark with graffiti, old ganger slogans in the main, but near the top of the steps someone had simply written ‘It hurts.’ The words were brown and crusty, as though they had been written in blood.

‘What kind of hospital was this, exactly?’ Varus gagged as they finally reached the door that gave out onto the second floor landing.

Written on the inside of the door, in the same hand: ‘Turn back.’

‘A very, very cheap one,’ Lopata said.

Cully thumped his shoulder to tell him to shut up, and he pushed the door open and eased out into the hallway with his lasgun held tight to his shoulder. There were two glowstrips still working here, both of them strobing and out of sync with each other. It gave the light a broken, battlefield staccato quality that made his head begin to hurt almost at once. The walls were lined with gurneys, their once-white paint peeling over blistered, rusty frames. Some were stripped to bare, dark-stained mattresses, while others bore heaped mounds of reeking bedding.

Down the hall, something shrieked behind a closed door.

‘Careful,’ Varus cautioned in a low whisper, her hand on Cully’s elbow to stay him. ‘It could be a trap.’

‘You can’t fake agony like that,’ Cully replied, and shook her off as he began to advance down the corridor.

They found the operating theatre, the source of both the surgical drain and the screaming.

There was something strapped down on the table, and it was still alive. A man, Cully saw, or at least some of one. The room was filthy with dried blood and old, rotting offal, but the equipment and surgical machinery looked well maintained, gleaming with sacred unguents and bedecked with fresh purity seals. The poor bastard on the table was mewling in agony, unable to form words with his lower jaw surgically removed, but his lidless eyes were open wide in mute appeal.

He had been bisected at the waist, his pelvis and everything below removed, but the base of his spinal column and his tailbone still thrashed helplessly in a pool of seeping fluid on the stained and rotting leather beneath him. His right arm was gone too, the stump freshly sutured into a flesh-welded steel socket from which brightly coloured cables protruded like raw nerve endings. Tubes ran in and out of his mutilated body carrying blood, spinal fluid, nutrients. It was plain that none of them contained anaesthetic.

‘Emperor save us,’ Cully whispered. ‘Someone’s turning him into a servitor without lobotomy first.’

‘Who... who would *do* this?’ Lopata asked.

Varus just turned and vomited on the floor while Steeleye looked on impassively beside her.

The thing on the table drew in a great breath and let out a warbling moan.

‘Kuuuuh muuuuhhh! Uuuuuz kuuuuuh muuuuhhh!’

Cully swallowed, and shot it through the head with a three-round burst that put a final end to its suffering.

‘The Emperor’s Mercy,’ he whispered.

‘We are not leaving until we make this right,’ Steeleye rasped.

‘Agreed,’ Cully said. ‘Move out.’

The further into the facility they went, the worse it got. A maddened buzzing sound drew them to a closed room. When Cully forced open the door, a swarm of bloated black flies burst out into the corridor around them. He gagged at the stench of filth and rot that enveloped him.

The room was lined with open, reeking medical waste bins. A severed human arm lay atop a pile of flyblown offal, the pale skin bright with crude ganger tattoos. Hooks along one wall were hung with the bloodstained grey smocks of manufactorum workers.

‘Oh, Throne,’ Varus choked.

Even Lopata was retching, but all Cully could do was stare.

Cully had been starving to death, on Baphomet. He had eaten human flesh to survive. They all had. The Emperor protects, but He does not forgive. Cully could feel his punishment coming down on him like a hammer from the heavens.

‘These are the remains of local people,’ he whispered. ‘Gangers. Workers.’

‘I wish we had a flamer,’ Strongarm muttered as he hauled the door closed again. ‘It needs burning.’

‘This whole place needs burning,’ Cully said. ‘Come on.’

At the end of the corridor they heard thrashing behind a closed door, the metallic screech of unlubricated gears meshing as something woke as though from a long sleep.

‘Nuuuuuuurrrsse!’ it roared.

Strongarm pulled a frag grenade from his bandolier and primed it, held it in his hand to cook for a second then booted the door open and hurled it inside.

‘Cover!’ he shouted.

The others flattened themselves to the solid concrete walls as the grenade detonated, filling the enclosed space of the room with hyper-velocity shrapnel.

Strongarm swept around the doorway and sprayed the room with a burst of full-auto.

‘Clear,’ he said.

The others moved to join him. The medicae servitor was lying on its back in a spreading pool of blood and viscera, its organic parts shredded by Strongarm’s grenade. The room was filled with broken cogitator equipment, smashed screens and buckled metal cabinets that spewed yellowed fanfolds of ancient paper records.

‘Throne,’ Strongarm muttered as he took a step forwards to stand over the fallen nurse.

‘Nuuuuuuuuuuuuuuurrrrrsse!’

Its chain scalpel roared into life and plunged into the inside of Strongarm’s thigh, severing the femoral artery in a great fountain of blood.

‘Run!’ Strongarm was bleeding out in a life-ending crimson spray before Cully’s horrified eyes. He pulled the pins on his bandolier of krak grenades one after the other even as he collapsed, his mouth set in a grim line of determination.

Dying is what soldiers are for.

‘No!’ Cully shouted, but it was too late. They ran.

The explosion took out three walls and brought down a section of the ceiling, filling the corridor with choking dust, and Strongarm went up to the Emperor’s

glory riding a comet of high explosive fire.

Into the smoke and chaos came the bark of a heavy automatic weapon and a hail of autocannon rounds that all but vaporised Trooper Esannason where he stood.

‘On the six!’ Cully roared. ‘Return fire! Kill, kill, kill!’

They blazed on full-auto, las-shots slicing through the choking miasma of dust and blood and fragments of chewed-up ferrocrete at a shadowy, half-seen figure that responded with another thunderous roar from its autocannon.

Steeleye dialled in and blasted a hotshot straight through it, knocking it back three or four paces, and Varus arced a frag grenade after it. They hit the deck, covering as best they could in the enclosed space of the corridor. The explosion went up and out and brought more of the ceiling down in a shower of broken, filthy tiles, and Cully came up on one knee and emptied his lasgun’s power pack into whatever was left until it stopped moving.

Cully lowered his smoking weapon and paused to wipe sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

‘Reload,’ he ordered, and they did as he said.

‘Strongarm,’ Varus said quietly, and Cully could only nod.

He hadn’t known Esannason, not really, but Strongarm had been in his section back on Vardan IV and they had fought some of their bloodiest battles together. He had been a good man, a good soldier.

Death and death and death.

He went forward to see what they had killed.

The thing was perhaps six and a half feet tall and had obviously once been a woman. She was less heavily modified than the nurses, but even so her right arm had been taken off at the shoulder and replaced with an articulated heavy weapon mount that ended in the autocannon. Its feed belt passed clean through her metallicity augmented torso to the ammunition hoppers that bulged out of her left hip and lower back. The skin there was stretched to ragged edges where the metal met her flesh in a way that hurt to look at. The sutures and flesh-welds looked new and painful, and there was even still a tinge of sickly colour to the remaining exposed skin of what was left of her human body. Her flesh was burned raw with weeping blisters where the feed belt had ripped through it at the terrifying cyclic speed of the cannon firing on full-auto.

‘This one’s a dedicated combat servitor,’ Cully said.

‘Was,’ Lopata corrected him, and grinned.

The big man had killed an ork in single combat, Cully reminded himself. Not

much was likely to frighten Lopata, but personally he found his stomach rebelling as he looked down at the mostly organic face of the dead woman. She was just some plain-faced hive worker; she certainly didn't have the look of the hardened criminals and blasphemous heretics who were usually condemned to servitude under the Adeptus Mechanicus and turned into these necessary abominations.

'Not a heavy one,' Steeleye rasped. 'I've seen those, when the engineer was repairing our firebase's Earthshakers under enemy fire back on Vardan IV. They're like half-human tanks. This one looks like it was put together in a hurry.'

'Or as a prototype experiment,' Varus put in.

The others turned to look at her.

'What?' Cully asked.

'That feed mechanism,' Varus said. 'I've seen combat servitors too, but I've never seen *that* before.'

Lopata shrugged. 'So what?'

'I don't know,' Varus admitted. 'But I don't like it.'

'I don't like any of this,' Cully said, 'but we're here now and something is obviously very wrong. We're going to find out what it is, and we're going to put a stop to it. Move out.'

'Why would anyone do this, though?' Steeleye growled quietly as she matched Cully's stride through the echoing halls.

'The answer's always the same,' Cully said. 'Follow the money. There's an ork warband on its way and only us poor bloody infantry here to stop it. The uphive is in panic, that's no secret. If you were a filthy rich uphiver under siege and afraid for your life and the lives of your family, and someone offered to sell you a heavy weapons combat servitor... what *wouldn't* you pay?'

'If who offered?' Steeleye asked.

'I don't know,' Cully said, 'but if someone did... I'm just guessing here, but those body parts and work smocks in the waste bins were all local. This is a hive world, Steeleye. There are gangers here. People who might just do a thing like that.'

'You honestly think someone is creating experimental combat servitors to sell to the uphive families?'

'I don't know,' he had to admit, 'but I wouldn't rule it out.'

'But *who*? Who would even know how?'

Cully didn't know. All he could do was shoulder his lasgun and advance.

It was in the Emperor's hands now.

Dareus Vorn swallowed bile and tried not to look.

The Genetor was bent over the operating table again. Long mechanical tentacles reached out of her hunched back through the slits in her floor-length crimson robe, whirring as they manipulated the instruments they held. Mechadendrites, he had learned those were called, and he knew they were fused directly into the Genetor's spine. The very thought of it made him feel sick, but that was nothing compared to... well, everything else.

The subject was shrieking again. Without looking up, the Genetor reached out an unnaturally lean, elongated metallic hand and stabbed a button with a fluted, claw-tipped finger. The narthecium's injector pistons hissed as they moved to drive their long needles home, and the subject fell silent once more.

Below, somewhere in the facility, Vorn could hear shooting. He ignored it, but all the same his hand wandered to the ornate bolt pistol holstered at his side under his elegantly cut coat. He was a heavy operator back in Hive Lemegeton, one of the top gangers on the planet in fact. He was still scared out of his mind.

The Genetor put down her instruments and turned to face him.

Vorn thought of the Genetor as 'her' because she used a feminine name, but that was all. So little of her was still organic that it was utterly impossible to tell otherwise. She said her name was Babette Vitzkowski, and she was the main reason why Vorn felt ready to soil his well-tailored breeches in fear. She straightened up to her full seven feet, her mechadendrites arching over her shoulders as she regarded him from a vision slit from which a tight burst of low-intensity laser light flickered and pulsed, as a stream of squealing binary machine language emitted from the grilled speaker where her mouth had once been.

'Forgive me, Genetor,' Vorn said. 'I lack the knowledge to understand the holy binharic cant.'

She knew that, of course, but over the last few months Vorn had learned that when the Genetor was lost in her work she could grow forgetful of mundane, human things. She regarded him for a moment before she spoke aloud, her vox/synth emitter crackling slightly.

'Ensure that noise is what it is supposed to be,' she said.

Vorn nodded.

'At your command,' he said, and went to check.

Any excuse to flee her presence was something he took gratefully and without

question, every single time. When something looks too good to be true it always is. Vorn should have known that at the time, but greed had won out in the end. It was, he knew, far too late to back out now.

His control room was on the third floor, the same as the Genetor's experimental operating room, whereas servitor production happened downstairs on level two. It sounded like that was where the shooting had come from. The earlier gunfire had been on the ground floor and outside where it didn't matter, followed by an explosion and three high-discharge las-shots that told him they had a sniper in their squad.

That was good.

That was potentially *very* good, if he knew his buyers half as well as he thought he did. He had to find *something* left in this for him, after all.

Vorn's mouth sagged open in relief as he watched them on the vox/pict-feed in his control room. The laboratory, the machine shop and the operating theatres belonged to the Genetor, but this place was his. He had pict-casters and vox-relays rigged up throughout the facility, the same way he spied on his blackmail subjects back in the heights of Hive Lemegeton. He knew what he was doing, but the Genetor was not one to forgive mistakes. If he had been wrong about this it would have gone agonisingly badly for him. He understood that all too well.

'Keep coming, corporal,' he whispered to himself. 'Just keep on coming, and I might yet live to see another day.'

He heard a burst of buzzing machine noise from the doorway, and turned to see the Genetor looming there with her crimson cowl pulled up over her gleaming metallic skull and her mechadendrites swaying slowly in the air over her shoulders. Her comm-laser flashed a tight burst of incomprehensible binary into his eyes.

He swallowed, to see her outlined there in the doorway of his own inner sanctum. He might be profiting from this but it was *her* operation. He knew that, and he well understood that he was just her meat puppet, to be tolerated only so long as he continued to be useful to her.

'Genetor,' he said, and it seemed she remembered once more.

'Report,' she demanded.

'Everything's going to plan,' Vorn said.

The Genetor regarded him in brooding silence for a moment, then turned away.

Vorn wiped sweat-slick hands on the thighs of his expensive breeches and fought down the need to sob.

‘Oh dear Emperor,’ Varus whispered. ‘Oh no.’

Cully felt his stomach turn over as he looked into the ward. There must have been twenty or more tormented human bodies in there, all of them in various states of vivisection. The air was thick with flies and the reek of rot and pus. Many hung from hooks suspended from a motorised overhead trackway, while others lay helpless on the stained, wet bedding that covered their rusty cots. Those who still had eyes flickered them open as the troopers entered the room. Others’ heads turned blindly towards the sound of the door opening. The poor bastards were limbless, in the main, their stumps either flesh-welded into sockets or simply open and seeping blood and corruption. Thick ropes of drool hung from the mouths of those who still had mouths at all, and the floor was dark with excrement and old blood.

‘This is sick,’ Lopata said.

‘Please,’ a man croaked, one of the broken limbless horrors hanging from its hook like a side of grox. ‘Make it stop.’

‘Make it stop,’ another echoed, and the chorus was taken up.

‘Make it stop!’

‘Who are you?’ Cully asked.

‘Just a loom mill worker,’ the man whispered, the breath labouring in a chest that had a number of thick, ridged tubes emerging from it between the broken second and third rib. ‘Not... not a criminal. Please, just a worker.’

‘It hurts,’ something moaned, and Cully honestly couldn’t have said if it had been man or woman before the surgeries began.

‘How did this happen?’

‘Abducted,’ the man wheezed. ‘We all were. Please, it hurts. Please, please. Make it stop.’

‘Make it stop,’ they echoed, these living damned who could still speak at all. ‘It hurts. Make it stop!’

‘Abducted by who?’

‘Don’t know. Please, it hurts. *Please!*’

Varus raised her lasgun and ended it with a single shot.

‘He might have told us something useful!’ Lopata protested.

‘I can’t,’ Varus said, as tears tracked down her grimy cheeks. ‘I can’t do this. I can’t *look* at this. In the Emperor’s name!’

She flicked her lasgun over to full-auto and went to work. After a moment Cully joined her in administering the Emperor’s Mercy. They fired until the ward resembled an abattoir, until their lasguns were hot in their hands and the very air

was red with misted blood, and it was over at last.

Varus dropped her smoking weapon and put her head in her hands, sobbing.

‘This is blasphemy,’ Cully whispered. ‘It’s probably *heresy*. We have a duty to stop it.’

‘How?’ Varus asked.

‘We’re the Astra Militarum,’ Cully said. ‘We do what we do. We find them, and we kill them.’

He’d said something like that once before, he remembered, back on Vardan IV. He gritted his teeth and forced down the memories, forced himself to stay resolute.

One more time, he told himself. *You can push your luck that far, Cully.*

Lopata blew his cheeks out and sighed.

‘If there are many more of those things we’ll lose, and then we’re dead, every one of us. If we’re lucky. If we’re not, we’ll probably end up like these poor bastards, lobotomised and amputated and—’

‘We won’t lose,’ Steeleye said, and Cully nodded.

‘We have to stop this,’ he said. ‘Someone is sweeping workers off the streets and doing *this* to them. Someone is selling the end products to the uphivers. That’s war profiteering, and we’re going to put a sodding end to it.’

Lopata nodded slowly.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I’m with you there.’

‘War profiteering, am I?’ Vorn sneered as he watched them over the vox/pict-feed in his control room. ‘Well, aren’t I a bad boy, Corporal Cully, you self-righteous prig. And you, Corporal Lopata, you nearly bit my man’s hand off for an easy payday, so don’t you come on all holier than thou now. I’m just trying to stay alive. You’re no better than I am and you know it.’

He pushed himself back from the desk and got to his feet, drew his bolt pistol and checked it held a chambered round. They would be on their way up soon, and he had some people he wanted them to meet.

Vorn crossed the corridor to the special holding room, the space that had once been the medicae facility’s secure mental ward, and looked through the armourglass viewport in the heavy ceramite door. They were both docile now, but he knew how easily that could be changed. They waited side by side, drooling as they stared vacantly into space. They had changed so much since he had brought them to the facility.

Vorn had known servitors before, of course, but these two were something

different. Something *new*, in an existence where innovation was far from encouraged. They were highly trained, highly skilled, and they were unlobotomised. The Genetor's new drugs alone had been enough to break them but still leave their combat training intact. It had been easy enough to lure them away from their posts with promises of a high-stakes game of Crowns and all the amasec they could drink.

The enemy makes work for idle hands, after all.

'We need to go up again,' Varus said. 'This facility is a three-storey building, they'll be on the top level.'

'So find the stairs, scout,' Lopata growled.

The stairwell they had taken from the ground floor didn't go any higher, and Cully could only assume that the top floor had once been the secure section of the medicae facility and off limits to both the normal patients and what few visitors they may have had.

Varus led them away from the horrors of the ward and down another flyblown corridor until she found the access stairs that led up to the top floor.

'There,' Steeleye said. 'See that?'

Cully shook his head.

'See what?'

The veteran sniper's augmented vision often detected things the natural human eye missed, and Cully always listened to her when she spotted something.

'That little hole in the corner of the ceiling,' Steeleye said. 'It blinked, just for a second. That's a concealed vox/pict-caster.'

'Great,' Lopata muttered. 'So someone's watching us. Probably has been since we got here.'

'This just gets better and better,' Varus said.

Cully lifted his hand toward the camera and made an obscene gesture.

'Hey, arsehole,' he shouted. 'We're the Imperial bloody Guard, and we're coming for you! Death and death and death!'

'Kill! Kill! Kill!' the others chanted.

Cully raised his lasgun and shot out the camera. The stained and filthy ceiling tile exploded as the las-round tore through it, and a length of sizzling cable snaked down from the cavity above and swung in the air, smoking.

Lopata kicked the door open and led the way up the stairs.

Vorn jerked back from his screen as the pict-feed went out with a blinding flash of searing white energy that threatened to overload his display equipment.

He reached out and flicked the vox-switch.

‘They’re coming, Genetor,’ he said. ‘The best subjects you’ve ever had – two veteran corporals, a scout, even a sniper. I have programmed the new servitors to take them alive.’

‘I will prepare the operating theatre,’ the Genetor replied. *‘I want them within thirty minutes.’*

‘I don’t think it will take that long,’ Vorn said, and hit the switch that threw back the bolts on the ceramite door and triggered the attack servitors.

Cully stepped out of the stairwell into a vision of hell. The two things that charged them were abominations. Each was limbless, welded at the waist into a scaled-down, tank-tracked chassis that clanked and rumbled and tore tiles up from the floor beneath it as it advanced. Their left arms had been replaced with articulated blades, while the right arm of one was a heavy autocannon and the other a reeking, promethium-dripping flamer. Their greyish chests were bare, and the one with the cannon bore a crudely inked aquila tattoo across its right pectoral.

‘Sustained fire!’ Lopata ordered, and opened up on full-auto.

The two charging servitors twisted in the blistering hail of las-shots, but kept coming.

‘Throne!’ Varus shouted over the blaze of las-fire, ‘I recognise that tattoo! That’s Sharrik!’

‘Was,’ Lopata stressed, ‘and I’d lay odds the other one was Ells. That was then – they ain’t our mates now!’

‘Shut up and kill!’ Cully bellowed, squeezing the trigger of his lasgun harder as though that could make it shoot any faster.

Steeleye launched hotshot after hotshot into the grinding, relentless foe, speed reloading again and again in a blur of hyper-focused intensity that spoke of her consummate skill.

Chunks exploded out of the wall as the monster that had once been Trooper Sharrik unleashed its cannon, sending Varus to the floor in a heap as a ricochet slammed into the side of her helmet and dropped her, stunned.

‘Back!’ Lopata roared. ‘Don’t let them close the distance or we’re done!’

They fell back, still shooting, leaving Varus slumped on the ground. The servitors swerved around her prone body, and somewhere in the back of Cully’s head the crown dropped.

‘They want us alive,’ he said. ‘We... Emperor’s teeth, we’re next! This bastard

wants us for the operating tables. We've been lured here as subjects, Lopata!'

The big man uttered a roar like a bull ork and charged, his lasgun clamped in his right hand and still shooting as he ripped his bayonet free with his left. He blasted the nearest servitor, the one who had once been Sharrik, forcing it back under the hail of sustained fire until he could ram his bayonet through the flesh-welded joint where the autocannon met its shoulder. A flash of sparks erupted into the air and the weapon died. The hideous thing drove a long, wicked blade through the meat of Lopata's thigh, pinning him to the wall. He screamed in pain, but still somehow found the force of will to ram the muzzle of his lasgun into its mouth and blow the back of its head out with a savage burst of full-auto.

'Kill, kill, kill!' he bellowed.

Varus was unsteady but back on her feet then, and she and Steeleye and Cully turned their weapons as one on the thing that had been Ells and tore it to ragged chunks of burned meat and blackened, smoking augmetics, and it was done at last.

Death and death and death.

There would be no mention on the roll of honour for Sharrik and Ells, and no one would send the Letter to their next of kin. No one in the Astra Militarum could ever admit that this had happened, Cully knew that. They were wretched, honourless deserters. That was how it had been recorded, and that was how it would stay. The Munitorum's word was law in these matters.

He lowered his smoking weapon and looked down at the blackened, twisted remains of his dead comrades while Lopata wrenched the blade out of his thigh and limped towards them, the leg of his battledress trousers running red.

'We always kill our own. Death and death and death,' Cully whispered. It was like Vardan IV all over again. Like Baphomet. 'Emperor protect us.'

He felt Steeleye's hard hand alight on his shoulder, bringing him back from the poisoned brink of memory and madness.

'We've got a job to finish,' she rasped.

They met no more resistance until a single bolt-round blew Steeleye's head apart.

She fell in a spray of red mist. The bulbous, broken mechanism of her eye hit the ground and rolled across the tiled floor to come to rest against the side of Cully's boot.

Lopata put a long burst of full-auto through the doorway the shot had come from, and Varus and Cully swarmed down the corridor to contain the threat

while the big man limped after them.

‘Come out, you bastard!’ Cully shouted. ‘You might want us alive, but I don’t care either way about you. Three seconds and I’m rolling a frag grenade in there!’

‘I have money,’ a man’s voice called out, and there was a note of terrified desperation in his tone. ‘Lopata, listen to me! A thousand crowns, right now! Ten thousand, if you can get me back to the hive. Get me out of here, please! We can still do business!’

‘I’ve got grenades too,’ Lopata snarled. ‘Steeleye was my mate.’

‘I can...’ the man said, and Cully lost his temper.

He kicked the door in and charged, shooting high but laying down enough suppressing fire to send the lone man inside face first to the floor.

Lopata landed on him like a Rhino dropped from orbit, knocking the air and the fight out of him all in one. Cully stamped on his hand until he let go of his bolt pistol, and they held him fast with field restraints.

Cully knelt down beside their captive, drew his bayonet, and pressed the tip into the corner of the man’s eye. There was no mercy in Corporal Cully’s gaze just then, no compassion and no hesitation. He was *Astra Militarum*, and the thing needed to be done. Just like it had on Baphomet.

‘Name?’ he demanded.

The man’s jaw clenched in empty defiance.

‘Your name, or Emperor help me I will blind you,’ Cully promised.

The ganger held out until Cully’s blade drew blood from the corner of his eyelid, then he finally seemed to think better of it.

‘Vorn,’ he said at last. ‘Dareus Vorn.’

‘Who else is here?’

‘I’m alone,’ Vorn said.

Cully pressed the edge of his blade back to the man’s face with a snarl that was just this side of deranged.

‘You’re no surgeon,’ he growled. ‘You’re the money man, I can see that just from the way you’re dressed. The surgeon! What’s *their* name?’

‘Babette Vitzkowski.’

‘Where is she?’

‘Go sit on a grenade,’ Vorn said.

Lopata kicked their captive so hard Cully could actually hear the man’s ribs shatter.

Vorn howled.

‘You’ll answer him,’ Lopata promised, ‘or you’ll answer to me. I was a ganger too, back on Reslia. I know tricks with bolt cutters and needles that would make you beg for death, you piece of filth. *Answer him!*’

‘Operating theatre,’ Vorn admitted at last. ‘Fourth door on the right. That’s where she does the work. This is all her. I just sell the things!’

‘How could you?’ Varus asked.

‘How do you think?’ Vorn snarled. ‘For money. To get rich. To not have to live like them. Like *you*.’

‘Let me show you how I live,’ Lopata said.

Then the beating started. It went on for a long time.

When it was done, Lopata’s fists were red and dripping. Vorn was dead. Cully put a round through his forehead anyway, and turned away.

He had a chirurgeon to kill.

They found the operating theatre in darkness.

Cully stepped cautiously inside with Lopata and Varus behind him, their lasguns held tight to their shoulders as they advanced.

‘I see something,’ Lopata said. ‘There’s—’

The searing purple flash of plasma fire all but blinded Cully. He threw himself to the ground, barely biting back a scream as his hands landed in boiling liquid.

When Cully realised that molten liquid was all that was left of Lopata, he went berserk. He came up on one knee, clutching his lasgun in his already blistering hands and blasting into the darkness on full-auto. Somewhere at the end of the room sparks flashed from something moving.

‘Lopata’s gone!’ he shouted at Varus, who bellowed and hurled a grenade.

The explosion smashed the operating table into scrap metal and shattered a long row of glass jars, spilling preserved organs and slimy fluids into the air.

In the sudden flash of light Cully saw that there was something huge standing at the end of the room. It had a plasma pistol in its unnatural-looking hand.

The pistol discharged again just as Cully was rolling. The beam of searing light only took his left leg off at the knee instead of vaporising him altogether.

He shrieked and crashed to the ground, barely able to draw another breath for the agony that sent his lungs into spasm. He could smell his own flesh cooking as the intense heat of the weapon’s beam cauterised the ragged wound.

Cooking human flesh.

Baphomet.

He had always known it would come back on him, in the end.

‘Always shoot the big one first,’ a vox/synth voice said, away in the darkness. ‘That is how one deals with orks, and you are little different in the eyes of the Ommissiah.’

Cully’s vision greyed with unspeakable pain.

Little different to orks. Since Vardan IV, since what he had done on Baphomet, Cully could almost believe it. Was this it? Was this the Emperor’s judgement, at last?

No, Cully told himself. No. He still had his lasgun. He was still a Guardsman. He could fight. He dragged himself forward with his elbows, the weapon clutched in his weeping, burned hands, biting back a scream as the exposed bone of his ruined leg scraped against the tiled floor.

Varus was shooting, somewhere in the darkness.

‘Such waste,’ the mechanical voice said. ‘At least I still have two subjects.’

A drill whined: the high, piercing shriek of the dentist’s chair. Varus howled.

Cully fired blind, the staccato light of las-shots showing him a towering robed figure bent over his squad-mate. Arching mechanical tentacles reached over its shoulders and took Varus’ lasgun away from her even as the drill went into her forehead. Cully’s shots ricocheted uselessly from the figure’s armoured mechanical carapace, doing nothing but putting holes in its crimson robe.

Varus slumped to the ground, subdued and drooling.

‘No!’ Cully howled. ‘Emperor’s mercy, no!’

‘The Emperor has no mercy,’ the monstrosity declared.

It began to walk slowly towards Cully’s prone form.

His lasgun’s power pack died, leaving him without even the light of gunfire. The heavy tread of steel boots brought the horrific surgeon relentlessly closer.

The darkness reminded him of Baphomet, and of what he had done there.

Cully found that he was weeping uncontrollably. For Varus, for Steeleye and Lopata and Strongarm and all the countless others he had lost over the years. Most of all, he wept for Sergeant Rachain.

The Emperor protects, but He does not forgive. This was the Emperor’s judgement, come at last.

For Baphomet.

For everything.

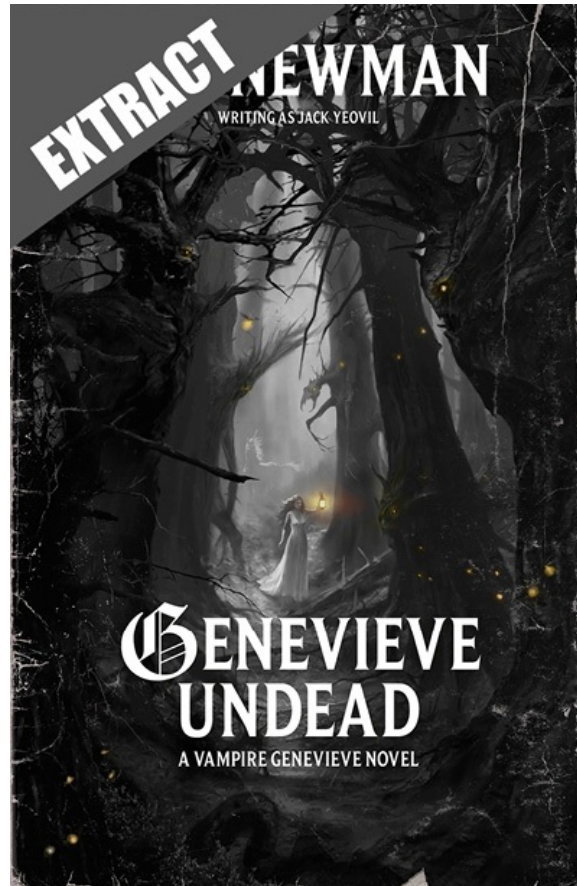
Death and death and death.

Corporal Cully began to scream.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter McLean has written several short stories for Black Library, including 'Baphomet by Night', 'No Hero', 'Sand Lords' and 'Lightning Run' for Warhammer 40,000, and the Warhammer Horror tale 'Predations of the Eagle'. He grew up in Norwich, where he began story-writing, practising martial arts and practical magic, and lives there still with his wife.

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, Zhiiekhill 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 Zhiiekhill 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 Zhiiekhill.

On the stage, the potion was ready. Detlef-as-Zhiiekhill drained it, and Hubermann's eerie tune began again as the influence of the magic took hold. *Dr Zhiiekhill 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 Zhiiekhill's brother, the monster was pulled back inside the cleric and Zhiiekhill, chastened and shaking, stood revealed before the philosopher, the ghost was slapped by the realization that this would never happen to him. Zhiiekhill 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, Zhiiekhill 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 Zhiiekhill, 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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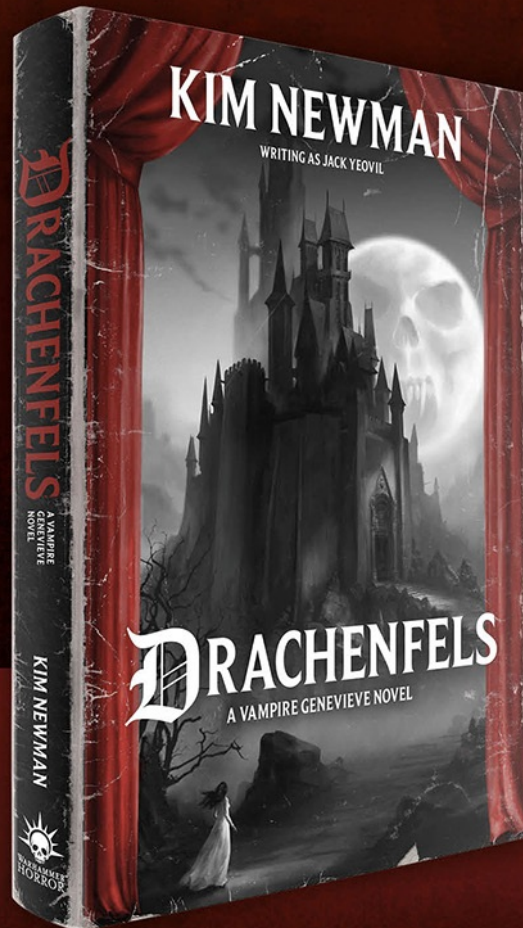


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