



WARHAMMER  
40,000



*Guy Haley*

# NURGLE'S GIFT

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# THE TALLYMAN

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The charnel reek escaped the graveyard, and hung heavily over the village. It came from every rough wooden doorway, from every window, from every byre. It came from the dead lying unburied in the streets and it came from the living.

A fine timber church dominated the village. Hymns sung from ragged throats croaked outwards, like the calls of carrion birds. But no carrion bird came to the village. They would not feast upon the dead there.

Outside, two troubled worthies stood. Neither was untouched by the plague. One was the mayor, Sarna Torel, a tall man, handsome features blighted by clusters of purple sores. By him was Gulveeg, village preceptress. Bent and old already before the sickness came, her face stared always now at the mud, and her hands shook upon her staff. She coughed often, and hard. 'The sickness grows worse,' she said.

'We must pray to the Emperor,' he said. 'It is our only salvation.'

She laughed. All too quickly it became a dreadful hacking. She spat blood. 'Did He come when the raiders burned our homes? Did He come when the drought struck? Did He come when our children died of the bloody flux? He did not,' she said. 'The Emperor has turned his face from us, that is the truth of it.'

Sarna Torel was not shocked. Devout in her youth, experience had destroyed Gulveeg's faith, wearing it away like a tooth's enamel, to leave an exposed nerve of resentment. She peered at him from under her thatch of coarse grey hair, expecting rebuke.

'I will not scold you for your blasphemy, Gulveeg, not today. I am numb from all this. But I will pray, for there is nothing else to do.'

'You think I am right then?' she said.

Sarna Torel did not reply.

Encouraged, Gulveeg went on. 'There are others to whom we could raise our voices. One who could cure our sickness.' She looked up into the mountains surrounding the village. Grey trees clung to their sheer faces, the peaks hidden forever in shrouds. 'There is a blighted spot in the forest. A cave with a foul odour, a triple gong hanging from a crooked tree. If we gave our prayers to the

Old One there, He who is a true power and not our careless Emperor, then perhaps we may live.’

Sarna Torel was appalled. ‘Take that back, preceptress! You damn yourself! What if the Emperor were to hear? You will be cast away from His light.’

Gulveeg stared at the church, listened for a space to the unlovely singing.

‘He stopped listening a long time ago, Sarna. There is no light.’ She limped away. Torel watched her go into the rising evening mist, tainted by the smoke of pyres.

Torel did not follow Gulveeg’s advice. Soon he was dead. But someone went to the crooked tree, through the toxic fogs of the valleys. There they found the triple gong. No matter how many times it was thrown down from its hanging and destroyed, the gong was always replaced. Village priests, the bishop from the city, once even an off-world confessor – all thought they had succeeded in their exorcism, but come the next visitor, the gong was there again.

The gong sounded loudly over the village one watery noon. A harsh clang, not musical at all, that spoke of rusted metal and raps on sealed tomb doors. It darkened the minds of those who heard it, but brought comfort to them also, so dire was their suffering.

Who rang it, they never knew. People were dying all the time.

One week later, the fogs crept down from the mountains in earnest, and they came. They strode from the mists unannounced, six ancient warriors, as if they walked from one room to another. Perhaps that is all they did, these giants, for the world to them is not as it is to us. They are made mighty by the Great Father.

The boy Marven saw them first, as he chopped feebly at hard clay. Few were working the fields, so many were sick. Marven had six siblings, all ill. His parents were dead of the plague. He, the youngest, was yet healthy. They said he was blessed. But he was hungry. There was no one to provide the village with its food, and his arms grew weaker every day. He was not big enough to successfully tend the field at the height of his strength, now his efforts were pathetic. He cried as he dug, knowing he could never feed his brothers and sisters.

The gritty squelch of the mattock in the clay took up time, like a song. Marven paused, thinking he was losing his mind. Silence, he heard nothing. He glanced about the wet fields fading rapidly into the mists, the black line of the causeway their abrupt horizon. Marven began digging again, and almost immediately stopped. This time he heard the song for certain, a dirge punctuated by jovial

shouts. He stopped his efforts, laying down his mattock. Six giant shadows strode through the fields on the causeway. He watched them go, mouth open. They were misshapen and shambled, although they moved quickly. The song and the figures were swallowed by the fog. He stared after them, unsure what to do.

Unexpected pain stabbed at his calf. He cried out, and looked down at the cause of his injury. A fat, malicious creature leered up at him from the mud, teeth pink with Marven's blood. It pointed a bent finger at him and tittered. Only then did Marven run.

Six warriors of the Great Father strode into the square. The villagers present stopped whatever listless tasks they were about. Cries went up and more villagers came until a thin crowd had gathered.

The warriors were as tall as the mountains and as ravaged, blessed prodigiously by the Great Father. A potent miasma cloaked them. They were clad in ancient wargear, rusted edges biting into puffy skin. Their weapons had fitments of slimy wood. Every one of the men exhibited the signs of terrible disease. Their flesh was pitted with sores. Many were missing extremities – nose, fingers, jaws or ears. Their armour was let out in the middle, for the sake of their bloated bellies. Others had disposed of part of their harness that would no longer accommodate a distended foot, or a swollen arm. A few fat flies buzzed about. When these came close to the villagers they recoiled in fear, for human faces stared back from black-haired bodies.

For all their horrible appearance, the warriors were tall and proud. They surveyed the crowd haughtily. When they adjudged the number of people present sufficient, their leader spoke.

‘Children of the Great Father! You called upon us, and we have answered!’ His voice gurgled. He stared around the square with rheumy eyes. The whites were yellow, patterned with bright red veins. They were dangerous, those eyes. A sharp mind was behind them, but the edges of it were as corroded as the edges of his armour, nibbled at by insanity. His skin was scabbed and scurf clung to the corners of his mouth. His teeth were grey. ‘We will bless you, as you have requested. We have one amongst us who has the ear of the Great Father!’

He pointed at a slobbering monster in their midst. Its flesh was like wax heated, let to run then set again. His eyes were stretched teardrops, his mouth a long, drooping orifice into which was jammed a filthy metal pipe. His hands were fingerless, like mittens. One leg was a nest of writhing tentacles that

plucked at the soil. So repugnant was he, those that looked directly at him felt their minds slipping away. His armour was all that gave him the shape of a man. 'Through our brother, the Great Father will bestow upon you his gift, for ours is a god who listens. He is not insensitive to the suffering of his children.'

Silence, coughing. The remaining villagers looked on with terror admixed with hope.

There was a commotion at the edge of the crowd. Gulveeg hobbled forward. She had worsened, her face a yellow and purple mass of bruises. She coughed every other word. 'They came, they came! Do you see? Do you see now? I was right! The old ways are strong here, stronger and truer than the corpse-lord.' This would have once earned her a painful death, but the others did not move against her. She pulled herself a little higher on her staff so that she might look into the eyes of the leader.

'What is the price of our salvation?' she asked.

'You are wise,' said he.

Gulveeg coughed and spat bloody phlegm into the filth of the square. The leader's ruined lips smiled at this.

'Nothing of value is given freely,' she said.

He nodded. 'We ask only this of you. Among your number is a boy, untouched by plague. Bring him to us, and we will be gone, and you will be free.'

'One boy?' she asked. 'One boy for all of us?'

'Yes,' he nodded. His goitre creased repulsively around the gorget of his armour.

Whispers from the crowd. 'Marven, he means Marven!'

Some of the crowd were against this sacrifice. Not many. That they stood listening to such creatures at all spoke volumes for their moral flexibility.

Gulveeg stood as tall as she could against the pressure of her bowed back. 'It is one of us! That is all, one to save all the others!'

Muttered debate went among the villagers. The warriors waited patiently, and not for long. In short order a party of the least sick was despatched. Marven was brought. His skin had become waxy and he sweated profusely, but he struggled desperately.

'Here he is! Here is the only one who is free of the plague!' said Gulveeg. Hope had given her strength, and her voice was clearer.

Marven could not get away. The hands that were laid upon him were feeble with disease, but he was only one, after all, and his limbs were by now burning with infection.

He ceased his efforts and was slung to his knees before the warriors.

‘Will you kill me?’ he asked.

‘Do you wish to die?’ asked the leader.

‘No,’ said Marven. ‘I do not.’

‘Who does?’ the leader laughed. His men joined in; an unwholesome sound.

‘We will not kill you, but take you from here. See! The bite.’ The leader pointed. The giants crowded in to look. ‘This is from one of the Great Father’s creatures. Such a wound should be fatal within minutes, but you live still, although not for much longer. Do you not see, boy? You are blessed. You have already been chosen.’

‘For what?’ said Marven. His face was white, and from more than the imp’s poisons.

‘To become one of us. We have waged the Long War for millennia. Death takes us all eventually. We need be seven, for the number is sacred. There are but six of us, as you can see.’

Marven struggled to his feet. The giants did not move, but his neighbours and kin blocked his escape.

‘We are sorry, lad,’ they said, and pushed him into the arms of his new masters.

‘Do not grieve. Ours is a jolly lord, and long life awaits,’ the leader said to him. Two of his warriors took Marven’s shoulders in their huge diseased hands.

The giants left, the mist growing thicker to envelope them one by one.

‘Sirs! Sirs! What of your blessing?’ said Gulveeg desperately.

The leader turned back from the fog swallowing his men.

‘Why, it is already done!’ he said. ‘Be merry! You are blessed. You have Nurgle’s Gift.’

‘You have cured us?’

The leader was genuinely perplexed. His ruined features creased. ‘Why would we do such a thing? This plague is a rich present from the Father! It is not ours to take.’ He turned and walked into the fog. His shape became indistinct.

‘Then kill us then! End our suffering!’ called Gulveeg.

‘Do not be frightened. You will not die. You will never die.’

He was gone.

And they did not die. Ever. The village is no longer there, nor is the fane on the mountainside. But it is said that on foggy nights the gong can be heard. It is unwise to linger then, for the mists can trap a traveller upon roads he never intended to travel. He might find himself stumbling into the square of that

village, where the lost souls of its people are tormented still. They are agonised by disease, and will never find release.

Such is the nature of Nurgle's Gift.

# THE TALLYMAN

Anthony Reynolds

The bridge of the *Infidus Diabolus* was silent. Nothing moved within its crowded, claustrophobic confines. The servitors hard-wired into the controls and consoles were dormant, their eyes – those of them that still had them – blank and staring. Drool dripped in long ropes from gormless, grey lips.

Long shadows stretched across the lifeless bridge. The lumen strips overhead were uniformly dark, and even the dull green glow of data-screens were absent. Every monitor was blank. The only light on the bridge came from the unearthly ochre-tinged sky beyond the oculus.

On one of the consoles, a small blister-light began to flash red. A legless servitor, suspended from the ceiling by a mass of ribbed cables, shuddered and convulsed. Its cataract-ridden eyes rolled back into its head.

It had no mouth to speak of – its lower jaw was missing, and a mass of tubes and wires protruded from its throat, coiling up into the ceiling – but the vocabulator box upon its chest crackled with distortion as it awoke from dormancy.

‘Locator beacon activated,’ it croaked. It was an ugly sound, dry and rasping, though still recognisably human in origin.

‘Locator beacon activated,’ it repeated, speaking into the silence, speaking to no one.

‘Locator beacon activated. Locator beacon activated.’

Marduk, Dark Apostle of the 34th Host, knelt in prayer to the Dwellers Beyond, seeking guidance, when he felt her presence nearby. He rose from the depths of his meditations, bringing his spirit-form back from its rangings. There was the familiar jolt as his hell-promised soul became anchored within his flesh body once more, meshing into every fibre of its being.

Reality asserted itself. He felt the pull of the ship’s artificial gravity upon him, the beat of his primary heart within his chest. He breathed deeply, taking the blood-incense deep into his lungs. Behind the cloying, aromatic smoke, there was the scent of exotic spices, crushed wildflowers and moist soil. Behind that

was the stink of the warp, an electric tang that he could taste on his tongue.

‘Hello, Antigane,’ he said. There was no answer. He’d not been expecting one.

He opened his eyes. One was the dark mahogany common amongst those born of Colchis. The other was a burning red orb, the pupil a jagged black sliver.

He knelt before his personal shrine, jutting off his cell and arming chamber. An ancient eight-pointed octed taken from Davin was before him, its rough stone surface stained black by the blood of sacrifices.

She was close. The smell of wildflowers and spices had grown stronger, and his skin was now tingling, as if the air was charged. There was an uncomfortable scratching in the back of his mind. A drop of bright red blood splashed onto the flagstones before him. He reached up and wiped the blood from his nose. It was always this way with her.

Still kneeling, he turned.

She was standing there in the shadow of the arched entrance to his shrine, utterly motionless. At a glance, one might have mistaken her for a child. She stepped from the shadow and that illusion was shattered, for while she inhabited the body of a child of perhaps four years of age, she was something distinctly *other*.

Her cowed face was a shuddering blur, like the screen of a wildly shaking, faulty pict-viewer. Even to try to focus on her features made his head begin to throb. The scratching in his head intensified.

Marduk did not ask how she had entered his sealed chambers, nor how she had escaped her cell once again. It seemed it was impossible to hold her.

‘Was there something you wanted, little augur?’ Marduk said, not even attempting to keep his irritation from his voice.

The *Infidus Diabolus* had been marooned here above this daemon world on account of Antigane – or rather, on account of Marduk having stolen her from her previous caretaker, the Death Guard captain Nargalex – and he was beginning to wonder if taking her had been wise.

He had not expected her to answer, but she did, speaking directly into his mind with the voice of all the augurs that had come before her. The force of her pulsed into his mind, staggering him and turning the blood dripping from his nose into a torrent.

*The Tallyman calls.*

‘Are you well, my lord?’ asked Sabtec. The warrior’s cold eyes were narrowed.

‘I’m fine,’ said Marduk. ‘Who is it?’

They stood on the darkened bridge, before one of the cogitators that he had brought back to power. A blip on the screen blinked insistently.

‘I don’t know,’ Sabtec said. ‘Everyone is accounted for. But there is also this.’

Sabtec tapped a series of commands onto a console screen, and a snippet of a vox message began to play. It was a garbled mess of sounds infused with static. Amidst it all was a buzzing drone, like a swarm of insects, a scratching sound and a distant, mournful bell. But behind all of that, there was something else...

‘Repeat that,’ said Marduk.

They replayed the snippet again, applying a series of aural-scrubs to eliminate some of the background slush. Now, a single voice could be heard in the midst of the intruding sounds.

‘...taken. Nahren is dyi... done... Epidem... no... don’t, don’t...’

Both Marduk and Sabtec recognised that voice instantly, though they could make no sense of the fragments of his speech.

‘Enusat,’ said Marduk.

Sabtec and his 13th Coterie had been chosen to accompany Marduk to the surface of the foetid jungle world. How it was possible for the First Acolyte of the Host to be down there the gods only knew – he’d been lost aboard the *Vox Dominus* before the *Infidus Diabolus* had been pulled into this noxious hell-dimension – but it was undeniable that it had been his voice on the vox, and the Legion locator beacon was blinking insistently upon the screen of the auspex built into Sabtec’s heavily modified bolter.

‘How is the Coryphaus?’ asked Sabtec.

‘Getting worse,’ said Marduk. Kol Badar had been pierced by a blade wielded by the Death Guard Nargalex, and his condition had rapidly deteriorated in the days since.

Sabtec nodded his head gravely. ‘And the witch?’

‘I have sealed her within her cell and set a dozen guards, for all the good it will do,’ said Marduk. ‘Are your men ready?’

‘They are,’ said Sabtec.

‘Let’s do this,’ said Marduk.

The *Invisus* shot from the belly of the *Infidus Diabolus*, engines roaring as the snub-nosed shuttle flew out into the yellow, poisonous atmosphere beyond the embarkation deck’s integrity field.

Scores of ships of various size and origin hung in low orbit out there, listing

like drowned corpses. They were lifeless, those vessels, and all in various states of decay. Some were Imperial, while others were clearly xenos in origin. For others it was impossible to say, so overgrown were they, covered in fungal growths and thick lichen and vines that hung down hundreds of metres from their hulls. Reaching tendrils lifted up towards them from the decaying jungles below. Some battlecruisers and cargo ships had already been ensnared from below, becoming one with the rotting canopy.

‘Where in the name of the Urizen are we?’ asked Sabtec. Marduk had his suspicions, but did not voice them. Not yet.

The *Invests* began angling down, towards the surface of the daemon world, closing in on the Legion locator beacon. It dropped through titanic ravines, through a miasma of acidic gas-clouds, past immense trees bleeding blood-sap from wasted boughs, down, down, down towards the darkness of the forest floor.

On Sabtec’s order, the daemon-infused shuttle did not touch down for fear of being unable to lift off once more. It hovered some ten metres off the forest floor, held aloft by the down-thrust of its powerful engines, the pilot wary of the sticky-fronds of vast carnivorous plants unfurling towards it. It was far enough. The Word Bearers dropped the rest of the way, each of them landing in a crouch.

Marduk landed last, crashing down to the earth within a protective circle formed by Sabtec’s 13th. He landed in low hunch, balancing himself with one hand to the wet groundcover. In his other hand he held his crozius arcanum, his massive, spike-headed mace and the symbol of his holy office. He stared around him from behind the grimacing visage of his skull-faced helm, his armour completely sealed against whatever toxins plagued the air outside. The *Invisus* lifted away, engines screaming, veering off over the canopy and disappearing from view.

It was unnaturally hot, and rivulets of water ran down the Word Bearers armour plates. Swarms of insects clouded the air, many of them bloated to the size of a man’s head, with glossy-sheened wings and reflective compound eyes. The wet, spongy mulch underfoot writhed with worms and beetles. Bigger things crashed through the branches overhead, sending down flurries of rot, soil, and maggots. The Word Bearers scanned the undergrowth, bolters tracking for potential threats.

‘How close are we?’ asked Marduk.

‘Hard to say,’ said Sabtec. ‘The atmospherics are playing havoc with my auspex. But not far. Perhaps an hour.’

It was longer.

It felt like they'd been cutting their way through the foul, rotting jungle for weeks, but it could only have been hours. At times the undergrowth was so thick they had to burn a path with the squad's flamer. They'd lost vox-contact with the *Infidus Diabolus*, but continued on, honing in on the blinking beacon.

Finally, they were close.

They scrambled up an overgrown incline and half-climbed, half-dropped down through a collapsed dome that might once have been the apex of a temple but had long been claimed by the fecund, rotting jungle.

They took up position, crouching behind overgrown stone balustrades. The 13th were exceptionally well-drilled, instantly securing a perimeter, covering all angles of approach.

Below them, in the hollow of what might have been the temple's nave, a creature that was not human worked.

It was a repulsive, bloated thing of dead, rotting flesh. Its skin was the colour of a month-old corpse left to rot in water. A single curved horn protruded from its forehead. Its arms and legs were spindly and wasted, but its belly was disproportionally distended. In places, its dead flesh was torn, exposing diseased muscle, bone and organs.

It was hunched over a rotting writing table made from bones, worm-riddled wood and twisted branches. Its bulbous head was down as it concentrated on its work, scratching at a huge book opened before. Periodically, it dipped its twisted stick of a pen into a black inkwell filled with squirming things. It muttered under its breath as it worked, a deeply sepulchral and completely unintelligible, monotonous drone. It sounded as if it were counting.

'The Tallyman...' breathed Marduk.

Great piles of books bound in leather formed teetering pillars around the daemon, each pile slowly being subsumed into the earth. Pale fungal growths clung like limpets to them, and even from here, Marduk could see the insects and worms writhing within the bound pages.

Beside the daemon was a large abacus, taller than one of the Legiones Astartes. In place of counting beads there were skulls. Marduk recognised human, eldar and ork skulls. A few of the others were less familiar. Every few breaths, the daemon reached out with a spindly, cancer-ridden arm and clicked those skulls along the rods that impaled them before turning back to his work.

Sabtec pointed. Marduk nodded, his expression within his skull-helm darkening. There was a helmet of the XVII Legion upon the abacus, acting as one of the counting pieces.

Nearby was a twisted hourglass. While the sand was clearly falling, it did not appear to empty the top half, nor ever fill the base.

It took a moment to realise the Tallyman was not alone. The ground around the feet of the daemon's desk and scabrous chair was undulating with movement. At first Marduk thought that he sat in the centre of a befouled pond rippling with whatever things lived below the surface, but he saw now that he was mistaken.

Surrounding the Tallyman were hundreds of tiny, waddling daemons, bloated pustules the size of a man's head, each with tiny arms and legs, oversized mouths, and twisted branch-like horns. They shifted and struggled against each other, trying to get close to the Tallyman, pushing and pulling at their comrades. They were completely silent, however, as if unwilling to disturb his work. For its part, the Tallyman appeared completely oblivious to the tiny, fighting daemons.

Sabtec presented the screen of his auspex to Marduk. It showed the blinking red light of the locator beacon. They were right on top of it.

All that could be heard from below was the scritch-scratch of the daemon's nib on parchment, the creak and groan of the rotten trees pressing in upon the crumbling temple, and the low muttering of the Tallyman.

Sabtec lifted his bolter, customised for long-range sniping. He locked his sight's targeter upon the hunched daemon, aiming at the base of its skull.

'No,' said Marduk. 'We are in a place holy to the Plague Father. Possibly the Garden of Nurgle itself. It would not be wise to raise his ire.'

'The Garden of Nurgle?' Sabtec breathed, lowering his weapon.

'I believe so,' said Marduk.

A dull moan issued up from an unseen place below. It was a groan of unutterable pain and torment, and it was most assuredly of human origin. The Tallyman paused, glancing up at something out of the Word Bearer's eyeshot, something located underneath the overhanging lip on which they crouched. The daemon tutted, before turning back to its work.

Without a word, the Word Bearers inched their way around the edge of the dome, until they were granted a view of what had made that pitiful sound.

Marduk had been expecting Enusat, and while it was a Word Bearer – or rather it had *once* been a Word Bearer – it was not his First Acolyte.

He was strung up on a wooden frame, his arms and legs outstretched. His limbs were still encased in deep red plate, each section incised with holy scripture, but his body and head were bare. The power armour had been peeled off him like the shell of a beetle.

That exposed flesh was foully bloated and disease-ridden, bulging with

tumours and cancerous growths to such a degree that he looked barely human. His neck was swollen, one of the glands in his throat having expanded to such an extent that it looked akin to the repulsive daemons cavorting around the base of the wooden frame upon which he was pinned. His face was a misshapen ruin, his eyes swollen and leaking milky fluid, his lips blackened with plague, his swollen, mucous-lined tongue lolling from his mouth.

But that was not the worst that had been done to him. He'd been opened from neck to belly, his fused ribcage splayed back like cage doors and his skin and flesh pinned back onto the wooden support-frame, exposing his inner organs. Both his primary and secondary heart were on display, beating fast.

His internal organs were disease-ridden and blotchy, with lumpen growths within them, their surface slick with filth.

Things were crawling inside his chest and stomach cavity, nestled amongst his organs – worms, larvae, beetles and at least three of the repulsive, pustule-like daemons. Flies surrounded him, laying more eggs in his exposed flesh.

It was Narhen, the Dark Apostle of the Third Host. How he was alive was beyond understanding.

‘What do we do?’ asked Sabtec.

‘There’s nothing to be done for him,’ said Marduk. ‘He belongs to the Grandfather now. We go.’

Using hand signals, Sabtec ordered his warriors to pull back.

‘Wait,’ said Marduk. He pointed towards a mound next to Nahren, squirming with diminutive plague daemons. ‘What is that?’

Sabtec sighted along his scope for a long moment, before lowering it.

‘That,’ said Sabtec, ‘is First Acolyte Enusat.’

Marduk walked towards the hunched figure of the Tallyman. The 13th had dropped down to the ground floor of the templum with him, and they fanned out around him now, bolters raised, aiming at the daemon. It had not yet noticed them, intent on its work.

The tiny daemons around the Tallyman spotted them first. One of them pointed with a tiny, stick-like arm and let loose a piercing squawk. The Tallyman’s pen slipped, a blot of ink spurting from the nib, and it looked up in displeasure. More of the tiny plague daemons were screeching now, scrambling back away from the approach of the Word Bearers.

The Tallyman turned towards them, and Marduk saw its face for the first time.

It was repulsive. It had no nose, merely a pair of filth-clogged slits, and a

singular, misshapen eye, weeping pus and with flies clustered at its corners, peered at them from beneath the curving horn jutting from its forehead. Its wide gash of a mouth gaped open as it saw them, exposing a graveyard of rotting tusks and chisel-like teeth. Worms writhed in its throat.

Its eye widened and it spluttered and choked in outrage at its work being interrupted by these interlopers.

Behind it, Dark Apostle Nahren's bleary, infected eyes turned towards them. He tried to speak, but nothing came forth except a low moan. At his feet, the sea of tiny daemons swarmed protectively towards the Tallyman. They tumbled off the mound that was Enusat, exposing him to view. He was on his knees, his arms bound behind his back. His armour was pitted and blistered, his joints and exposed cabling covered in rust and verdigris. He wore his helm still, and lifted his head, seeing Marduk and the 13th. He tried to rise, but fell sideways.

The tiny plague daemons swarmed around their master, jabbering and spitting at the approaching Word Bearers. They clambered over one another, pushing and shoving, forming a living carpet of foulness around it. They continued to pile in, grabbing its chair with tiny filth-encrusted claws and lifting it above their combined bulk.

Holding the Tallyman aloft, the mound of tiny daemons rolled forwards. The Word Bearers came to a halt, the Tallyman looming above them, held unsteadily above the mass of daemons.

'Why do you interrupt my work, mortal?' asked the Tallyman, its corpse-voice deep and droning. If a cadaver could speak, this was the sound it would make. It was the voice of death itself.

'*Mortal, mortal,*' the tiny daemons holding the makeshift palanquin intoned, speaking as one.

Marduk bowed his head in respect. 'I come to bargain for the life of that warrior, old one,' he said, gesturing towards his First Acolyte, Enusat.

'You are a dead thing walking, pledged to another,' said the Tallyman.

*Another, another.*

'You have nothing to offer me,' said the daemon.

*Nothing, nothing.*

Marduk was momentarily wrong-footed.

'Pledged to...' he said. 'I do not know what you mean.'

'Begone! I have spoken, and so it shall be. I must return to my work.'

*Begone, begone!*

With that, the Tallyman turned away, borne aloft upon its rolling heap of

daemons.

‘Halt!’ bellowed Marduk, infusing his voice with the power of the warp. ‘Do not turn your back to me, daemon!’

The Tallyman glanced back.

‘You have no power over me, dead-thing,’ it said. ‘Not here. Not in the Garden. Away. I am done conversing with you.’

Marduk snarled and drew his bolt pistol, levelling it at the back of the Tallyman’s head.

‘I thought you said not to anger them?’ said Sabtec in a low voice.

In answer, Marduk squeezed the trigger.

The bolt hit the Tallyman square in the back of its malformed skull. The detonation blew out the front of its face in an explosion of blood, pus and rotten bone. The shot hurled the Tallyman from its chair, as if it had been yanked away from the Dark Apostle by an invisible cable. The tiny daemons screamed in anguish and outrage.

‘Go!’ shouted Marduk. ‘Get Enusat.’

The 13th broke into a run, angling for the First Acolyte. One of them squeezed off a burst of burning promethium into the apoplectic mass of tiny toad-like daemons, which screamed and wailed as they erupted, sizzling and popping. The warrior sprayed the line of flame left and right, consuming them.

Still, there were thousands more, and they rolled and waddled towards the Word Bearers, tiny eyes lit with maliciousness and hatred. One of the 13th was borne to the ground by their sheer weight of numbers, disappearing instantly beneath a wave of biting and clawing daemons.

The 13th’s bolters were coughing death, and their blades were wet with slime and filth as they carved a path towards the First Acolyte. Marduk struck one of the ball-like creatures with his crozius, sending it flying, its putrid flesh blackened by the sharp discharge of energy.

The Tallyman was not done, however. It pushed itself up from the ground. Its face was a ruin, a gaping crater of blood, mucous and filth, but still it rose, just as one of the 13th ran past. It grabbed the warrior by the helmet, lifting it off its feet. A jagged blade dripping with corruption formed in its other hand, coalescing into existence from a mass of repulsive flies. It rammed the blade through the Word Bearer’s body. The Tallyman lifted him high into the air, then hurled him away. By the time he landed he was already dead, his body transformed into a shrunken, diseased husk.

Marduk pumped three shots into the Tallyman, turning to fire upon him as he

ran by. The bolts detonated in its rotten flesh, blowing great rents in its body, but doing nothing to slow it.

Sabtec was the first to Enusat's side. With the crackling blade of his sword, he cut away the bindings holding the First Acolyte's arms and legs. He helped him to his feet, rusted armour groaning in protest.

Marduk stared up at the pitiful figure of Nahren, crucified upon the rotting wooden framework.

'Kill... me...' the Dark Apostle moaned.

A dull, sonorous bell began to toll. Deep bellows and the sound of huge things crashing through the trees beyond the temple followed.

'We have to go!' shouted Sabtec.

The Tallyman was closing in, wading steadily through the heavy weight of fire the 13th were pumping into it. Nothing would slow its implacable advance.

'We have to go now!' said Sabtec.

Marduk nodded. Another of the 13th had joined Sabtec, supporting Enusat between them. The flamer washed over the daemons once more, keeping the tiny ones back. Nahren's eyes followed the Word Bearers as they left him.

At the arched entry to the temple, Marduk turned back, taking Sabtec's long-ranged bolter from him. He pressed the stock of the bolter to his shoulder, aiming carefully. He fired just one shot. Nahren's head disappeared in a red mist, ending his torment. The Tallyman bellowed in fury.

'Marduk,' said Sabtec.

The Dark Apostle turned.

Huge daemons the size of buildings were emerging from the jungle, uprooting trees in their path as they came to answer the Tallyman's doling bell. They were foul things, immense versions of the tiny daemons that had infested the inside of the templum. More tallymen – scores of them – appeared around these behemoths, staggering towards the stairs atop which the Word Bearers found themselves. These daemons dragged blades dripping with poison behind them, and their lipless mouths snarled up at them in hatred.

But that was not what Sabtec was drawing his attention to.

Outside the arch, standing atop the mouldering stone stairs, stood Antigane.

She reached out to Marduk with one of her tiny, child's hands.

*Come with me.*

There was no other option. The daemons were all around, and closing in.

Marduk took the augur's hand.

Everything changed.

There was a wrenching sense of dislocation, a blinding light, and then they no longer stood upon a daemon world beneath a putrid, yellow sky. They were no longer within the Garden of Nurgle.

They stood now upon an irradiated wasteland, a shattered world of ruin and dust. A dying sun, flickering blue and purple, burnt in the heavens overhead.

A ghost of a smile curled at Marduk's lips. He knew this place. He'd been here before.

'Where are we?' asked Sabtec.

'This,' said Marduk 'is Calth.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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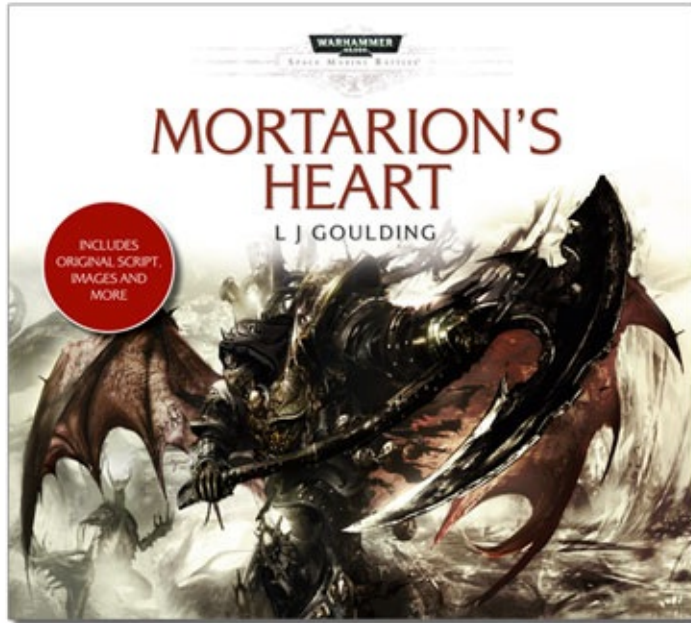
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