

05_Vox Dominus

Vox Dominus

by Anthony Reynolds

Part One

She had no face.

Or at least, not a face that he could discern.

Whenever he tried to focus on her, her features became blurred and smudged, like an over-developed pict image. Indeed, even to try made his eyes hurt. If he looked at her askance, focusing past her, he could see something of her features. They were unremarkable, it seemed. Air tubes fed into her nostrils, and her expression was blank. But whenever his gaze was drawn closer again, trying to discern more, her face would fade into obscurity.

He was as a ghost, floating weightless and insubstantial, unconstrained by his physical flesh-prison. He had cloaked himself in protective wards and enacted the letting-rituals that would hide his presence. But still she turned her blurred child's face up towards him.

She saw him. Her power was astonishing. She pierced his aegis without effort.

Daalakath mel caengraal, she said, in a long-dead tongue that he nevertheless understood. The blightwood grows.

A convulsion wracked his earth-bound body back on the Infidus Diabolus. For a moment he was in both places at once. He could smell the powerful incense coiling around him, could hear the chant of his Host and feel the vibration of the ship's engines. Yet he was also in the fathomless ocean of unreality, where the vision had brought him, surrounded by nebulous darkness and the powerful psychic void-presence of this girl.

The vision began to shatter like a flawed crystal, threatening to send him crashing back to his body. It cracked and splintered, leaving just the girl's blurred face, looming close in to his own. He could not look away.

He could see her eyes now. She allowed him to see them. Galaxies shone in their fathomless black depths. She looked through him.

He tried to retreat, willing himself back to his body, but she held him, ensnaring

him with her will. Her face was close now, filling his vision. It shivered, violently, shaking and shimmering before him.

A bewildering array of images, sensations and feelings flashed through his mind then, an overwhelming display. She was showing him these things. She wanted him to see them.

Later, when he returned to his flesh, he would be unable to recall exactly what he saw. Vague impressions and sensations would be all that he was left with: skies of burning yellow, an oppressive drone of a billion melancholy daemonic voices; a slender womans face, shining like milk and moonlight, tears running down her face. She was in a place of darkness, surrounded by movement. He saw a single blue eye, so clear and so perfect, with three pupils that juttet together to form one.

Devoid of context he could not understand them, nor perceive their purpose.

Lastly, he would remember that phrase. Daalakath mel caengraal. The blightwood grows.

The child whatever she was had seen the face of gods, and she had not baulked before them.

Then she pushed him away with her tiny childs hands, sending his spirit hurtling through the void, spinning out of control, and the lightning flash of images and sensations was severed.

Back on the Infidus Diabolus, Marduk smiled.

The black-eyed cherubs exhaled a heady smoke and he breathed it in, letting it coil within his lungs as he rose from the waking dream. To a lesser being, the incense would have been fatal. To the Dark Apostle it was merely an aid in communing with the Dwellers Beyond. The poisons it contained helped open his soul, the better for the gods to speak their will through his flesh. Still, their message was often confused and difficult to discern.

Who was the faceless girl? What message did she have for him? One thing he was sure of was that he must possess her. He must have her knowledge. He must have her power.

The Host was gathered in prayer in the expansive cavaedium at the heart of the Infidus Diabolus, but the Dark Apostle was alone, unobserved and hidden from view, away from his congregation. He knelt before a shrine covered in candles and braziers. Fire and faith danced in his eyes. Shadows writhed in the darkness beyond the candlelight.

The martyr he prayed within was dedicated to his former master, Jarulek. He liked to come here to worship it made him feel close to his gods. It had been he who had ended Jaruleks life, after all, an action that had clearly been ordained by the Ruinous Ones.

No one within the Host knew the dark secret of Jaruleks death, of course, though many no doubt suspected, Marduks Coryphaus among them. This pleased him. Jarulek was a fearsome warrior-priest and beloved of both Council and gods. Any warrior able to best him would be rightly feared.

Besides, Marduk himself sat on the Council now. His power and reach had surpassed that of Jarulek. Truly, the gods had blessed him.

The morbid chanting of the Host surrounded Marduk, embracing him and echoing around the enclosed space of the martyr. Behind it, barely audible, other sounds could be discerned. Hisses, groans, muffled screams. Those beyond the veil of existence were making themselves heard. The denizens of the living ether were joining the Host in prayer. It was a good sign.

The service had entered its final movement. The droning reaffirmation of faith was led, as ever, by the Coryphaus. The Hosts newly appointed First Acolyte had completed his ritual sermon and gloriatus, and the doxastika was now nearing its conclusion.

Enusat. The new First Acolyte. Marduk had personally chosen him, picking him from among a wide field of aspirants. Though there had been many more likely candidates presented to him on Sicarus, postulants handpicked for larger things from among the Hosts of other Dark Apostles, he had chosen Enusat from within his own ranks never again would he allow an outsider to hold a position of influence within the Thirty-Fourth, not after his last Acolytes treachery.

What Enusat lacked in formal teachings and religious indoctrination, he made up for in other ways, ways that could not be learnt by rote or by any amount of studying the Urizens holy scriptures. He was highly regarded within the Host

and respected by all. What's more, Marduk trusted him, utterly and implicitly, as he trusted few others. Such loyalty was to be valued. Everything else could be learned.

Most First Acolytes harboured dreams of power, always looking for their moment to overthrow their master. Such was the accepted way of things in the Legion, and Marduk himself had certainly fallen into that camp. He had no such fears with Enusat, however. He was a wardog, fierce and utterly loyal; a devout killer with an unwavering sense of duty. Tell him to saw off his own arm and he would, without question or hesitation.

Marduk felt the presence of an attendant hovering at the martyr's entrance. He could smell the foetid odour of its decaying flesh, and could hear the uneven rasp of its breath. It had been lurking there for some time, but it knew better than to disturb his meditations.

The final, doleful verses of the doxastika were intoned, and a deep, resounding bell tolled. Silence filled the void.

Marduk rose to his feet, servos in his revered battle plate purring softly. His armour had been with him since he had been first embraced into the Legion, and was as much a part of him as his own flesh.

For a time after the Boros Gate campaign, he had worn the ancient Terminator armour that had once belonged to the Warmonger, but the bond had not been the same. To not wear his own engraved plate felt akin to missing a limb, and while the Terminator armour was powerful, he had disliked the sensation of restriction it brought to his movement.

His own armour itched beneath his skin now, fusing to him, joining with his flesh and bone. Perhaps it was jealous and sought to ensure it was never removed from him again. The notion did not concern him. What need had he to remove it?

He turned. His face was hidden in shadow, backlit as he was by the braziers and candlelight. Only his left eye could be seen, burning with lurid witch-fire.

He towered over the hunched servant cowering before him.

Speak, he said.

We near our destination, revered one, hissed the robed creature, keeping its gaze obediently downcast. The time of translation is near.

Good, said Marduk. See that the Coryphaeus and First Acolyte join me on the bridge.

As you will it, revered one.

The pitiful creature backed away, bowing as it retreated, but Marduk gave it no mind. His mind was already occupied, projecting forth to the battle ahead. Too long had he been cloistered in the halls of Sicarus.

His left hand closed around the haft of his crozius, and he felt a thrill rush through his enhanced system. He longed to kill. He ached for it.

It was time to praise the dark gods in the manner that pleased them most by killing in their name. It was time to worship in the purifying fires of battle.

From nothingness the Infidus Diabolus burst into reality, trailing etheric afterbirth. Kilometres in length, its powerful form was protected by thick adamantium plating and shimmering void shields. Weapon banks bristled along its flanks, raised like the hackles of a threatened beast. Crenellations, domed templum roofs and skeletal cathedral spires ran down its spine.

The veil was thin here on the edge of the Eye, and the void was stained with swirls of colour. Dark shades of red and orange were cut through with ribbons of purple and blue, coiling and running together like oils atop a film of water. A trio of dying suns lit the Word Bearers strike cruiser from different angles, casting it in shades of deepest crimson.

A second ship flashed into existence alongside the Infidus Diabolus. Thousands of kilometres separated them, but in the emptiness such distances were as nothing. Indeed, most naval battles fought in the void were conducted at a range well beyond human sight, slow moving ballets that ended in the silent deaths of tens of thousands at a time.

These two ships, however, were not engaged in void war. They were not foes. Nevertheless, neither were they unguarded in each others presence. They kept a respectful, wary distance from each other, like predators that chose to hunt together for mutual benefit, while knowing they would turn on each other as

soon as prey became scarce.

The second ship was the Vox Dominus, and it dwarfed the Infidus Diabolus. It was a hulking battleship, Carrion-class, and though it was lacking in speed and grace, it was utterly brutal in short-ranged engagements, able to cripple and tear apart all but the most heavily armoured of capital ships.

It was the pride of the Third Host, a mighty vessel that had spread the word of Lorgar from one end of the galaxy to the other for millennia. Once it had been called the Vox Domina, but that had changed along with the focus of the Legions worship long before the nature of the Dwellers Beyond had even been fathomed by the other Legions.

Rippling waves of the living warp shimmered across the ships forms for a moment, like a parting caress from the gods themselves, before the last vestiges of the ether were shed.

A flare of light lit one of the Vox Dominuss shadowed launch bays and an escort shuttle designated Lux Aeterna spat forth, hurtling across the void between the two ships. It appeared tiny and insignificant as it closed the gap between the two battleships, a tiny mote of dust in the unfathomable, empty expanse.

Shuttle inbound, croaked a servitor hard-wired into the command console of the Infidus Diabolus. Do we engage?

A wry smile curled at Marduks lips.

Im not sure that the Third Host would appreciate it if we turned our guns upon their revered Dark Apostle, he said.

Do we engage? repeated the slaved creature, its putrefying flesh twitching spasmodically.

Marduk sighed. Do not, he said.

Open embarkation deck thirteen-four, said Kol Badar. Disengage automated defence turrets.

Acknowledged, drooled another half-mechanical wretch.

Should we not go to meet him, master? said First Acolyte Enusat.

His gaze was utterly without guile, but nor was it weak. Indeed, no one could ever accuse Enusat of weakness, for it was not a fault he possessed. Quite the opposite. He had a reputation for stubbornness and tenacity, and had depths of endurance that put the rest of the Host to shame. His faith was stronger than steel.

Marduk knew that if he ordered it, Enusat would unsheathe his ceremonial kantanka knife and draw it across his own throat. Hed do it willingly if that was his Dark Apostles wish, and if the hyper-coagulants in his demi-gods blood sealed the wound before it claimed his life, he would open his veins a second time.

Uncomplaining, uncompromising and fanatically devout, Enusat was the embodiment of what it was to be a Word Bearer. He was a truly ugly whoreson, however.

He had a face that looked like it had been immersed in acid. It looked that way because it had, in fact, been immersed in acid. It had also been shot, repeatedly beaten, burned and cut, so much that it now resembled little more than a roughly head-shaped lump of tortured flesh, from which two pale eyes peered at the world. His nose was swollen and shapeless, and his mouth was an angry slash. His teeth were made from dark steel, his own having long ago been smashed from his jaw.

Prayer beads and rosaries hung from his wrists and at his belt, and selected holy epistles from the Book of Lorgar had been scrimshawed across the plates of his armour. A tattered, blood-stained wolf skin, ripped from the corpse of a defeated priest of Russ, hung across his shoulders, and a scroll case carved from the thigh bone of the Hex-Deacon Hannaknut hung from his waist, containing an illuminated page from the holy Lamentations of Betrayal, a gift that Marduk had given him on the day he had been ordained as the Hosts new First Acolyte.

His armour was of an old mark, and heavily-modified. His greaves were bulky with the additional plating and stabilisers that marked him as a heavy weapons specialist. A powerfully built warrior, he stood Marduks equal in height, though his wide shoulders made him seem larger. Both, however, were overshadowed by the Terminator-armoured Coryphaus.

Let him wait, said Marduk.

He will not like it, said Enusat.

And that is exactly the point, said Marduk. I am of the Council now. Nahren must learn his place in the order of things.

I understand, master, said Enusat, bowing his head.

Petty games and politics, growled Kol Badar. It achieves nothing but to spread the seed of resentment.

A necessary evil, said Marduk. What the esteemed Coryphaeus fails to understand is

The Dark Apostles words were forgotten as a warning light began to throb, accompanied by a grating alarm.

What is it? demanded Kol Badar.

Unidentified etheric surge, replied a slaved servitor. Quadrant X.P. Ninety-nine point three point two.

Another ship making transference? said Marduk.

I dont think so, said Kol Badar, scanning the stream of data feeding across the curved black monitors above the bridges command console. It doesnt read like that kind of signature. Warp anomaly, more likely.

Master, said First Acolyte Enusat. He had moved closer to the broad viewing oculus and was staring out into the void. Marduk joined him. There, said Enusat, pointing.

Beyond the Vox Dominus, the void was churning. The garish green and purple swirls smeared across the emptiness were coiling towards a point beyond the hulking battleship.

That does not look good, said Marduk.

The bleeding colours of the void were being drawn in behind the holy Vox

Dominus with increasing vigour, spinning faster, creating a kaleidoscopic whirlpool to the vessels aft.

Its engines were flaring as it attempted to extricate itself from the danger, but it was a cumbersome ship and not built for rapid manoeuvring. Having only just emerged from the warp, its plasma engines were not even close to operating at full power.

How close is it? asked Marduk.

Too close, replied Kol Badar. All power to primary thrusters. Get us away from that thing.

The void rippled. A rent in the fabric of reality tore open in the centre of the swirling maelstrom behind the Vox Dominus, sucking matter and anti-matter into it like a siphon. For a brief moment, a place distinctly other could be glimpsed through that gaping window, a place of noxious yellow skies and dying worlds. Immense tentacle things coiled within sulphuric clouds, things the size of planets.

Gods above, breathed Enusat.

Yellow skies, murmured Marduk.

Enusat could feel something it gnawed at the back of his mind, scratching inside his skull. It was disturbing but not an altogether unpleasant sensation, like a host of unintelligible voices whispering in his head, the sounds blurring together into one sonorous babble.

Despite the power being re-routed to its engines, the Infidus Diabolus was being drawn inexorably backwards. The ship groaned in protest, the drag of the warp anomaly fighting against the impetus of its engines. Straining metal shuddered and screeched as the ship gave voice to its torment.

It was not the only vessel being affected.

The Vox Dominus, so much closer to the warp anomaly, had no hope of pulling away. It was being inexorably drawn into the gaping rent in unreality.

Enusat grabbed on to a spiked railing for balance as the ship was hauled off

centre, still staring out into the vacuum beyond the oculus. Almost half of the Vox Dominus had been pulled through the rift now, its back section existing in that daemonic otherworld. Then, with one final surge, it gave up its fight, and was sucked fully through. The rift slammed shut behind it, sending a ripple through the void that shook the Infidus Diabolus to its core.

Warning alarms blared. Viewscreens flickered, and the lights on the bridge dimmed. Every Word Bearer aboard the strike cruiser felt an uncomfortable wrench in their forsaken soul as the wave passed through them, a nauseating imbalance that made them reel.

Marduk suffered more than most, for his link to the warp was the strongest. His world spun, and he dropped to one knee, clutching at the command console for balance. He clenched his eyes tightly shut as intense pain lanced through his mind. Black bile rose in his throat, and he spat it onto the deck. Its acidic touch made the floor-grill steam and hiss.

Then the moment passed and power was restored to the bridge. Enusat reached instinctively to help the Dark Apostle, but he stayed his hand at the last moment.

Very wise, snarled Marduk, having seen the movement, as he hauled himself to his feet unaided.

The Coryphaeus was staring out into the void, and Marduk moved to his side.

Of the Vox Dominus, nothing could be seen. The anomaly too was gone, leaving just a patch of disturbed colour in its wake, still slowly spinning, before it became once again inert, as if nothing had happened.

Inbound shuttle has touched down on deck thirteen-four, said a servitor, breaking the silence.

Marduk swore. He had forgotten the Dark Apostle.

Thank the gods he was not aboard the Vox Dominus, said Enusat.

A small mercy, said Marduk. Now it just remains for us to tell him that his entire Host is missing.

We should move, said Kol Badar. This area of the Eye is unstable.

As if his words had been prophetic, another alarm began shrieking.

Perfect, said Marduk.

The hole in the universe tore open once more, precisely where it had been less than a minute earlier. Once again the Infidus Diabolus fought against its surging pull. But it was not the Infidus Diabolus the warp had come for. This time, the rift came bearing a gift.

A snub-nosed tug emerged from the swirling colour, an ugly vessel that appeared barely void-worthy. It was small, no larger than escort-sized, but its engines were immense for its size, and it was powerful enough to advance against the whirling pull of the warp rift. A massive chain was affixed beneath its aft.

It was dragging something into reality. Something huge.

Well thats

unexpected, said Kol Badar, staring at the unlikely sight.

Behind the tug, the Vox Dominus listed lifelessly as it was dragged from the spinning rent. Its engines were dead, and its plasma core cold. It was being hauled along like a carcass the prize of a successful hunt. As it cleared the warp, the rift snapped shut behind it.

Have Dark Apostle Nahren escorted here immediately, said Marduk. He might like to see this.

He stared at the tug vessel, as if his eyes might bore through its hull. There was something there

Something that called to him.

A previously inert servitor slaved into the control deck began to convulse.

We are being hailed, said Kol Badar.

Bring it up on screen, ordered Marduk.

A whitewash of static and crackling interference filled the oculus before

resolving itself into a face that might once have been human but was now so warped and diseased that it was barely recognisable. Enusats eyes widened.

Death Guard, spat Marduk.

His lean, imperious face was as emotionless as stone. He did not speak. He did not move. Even the cold black points that were his eyes gave away little of the true fury burning within.

Dark Apostle Nahren had seen more wars than every other Word Bearer present on the bridge put together. He had fought alongside the Urizen, and was counted among the most loyal warrior priests in the holy order. Marduk himself had trained under Nahren as an acolyte, and knew him as an uncompromising, fierce and highly respected Dark Apostle.

The hyper-observant may have noticed he breathed slightly faster and shallower than was normal, or that a tinge of blood-shot colour had stained his otherwise colourless, hieretic-inscribed cheeks. Few would register such telltale signs, but Enusat read them as clearly as a tome laid bare before him. The Dark Apostles rage was incandescent, and threatened to explode at any moment.

Enusats enhanced biology interpreted that anger as the threat of violence and responded in kind, flooding his system with adrenaline and combat stimulants. Every Word Bearer present could taste the aggression in the air, and their nerves were on a knife-edge every one of them was ready to kill, their gene-enhanced bodies primed for battle.

Nahren stared unblinking at the distorted face on the vid-screen.

What. Did. It. Say? he said, the muscles of his jaw twitching.

Salvage, said Kol Badar. They say they claimed the Vox Dominus as salvage.

Salvage, said Nahren, his voice measured, yet barely held in check. Salvage?

Enusat watched, fascinated, as the Dark Apostle struggled to maintain his control. Nahrens armoured hands balled into fists, accompanied by the whine of servos and fibre-bundles flexing.

It was an unforgiveable insult to see the Vox Dominus treated in such a way, and

their first instinct had been to annihilate the stocky tug vessel. Had its crew been simple pirates, the wreckage of their ship would already have been scattered to the four winds of Chaos.

No contact had yet been established with Nahrens Host. The Vox Dominus appeared completely lifeless.

Dark Apostle Nahren was accompanied by an honour guard of five mute Word Bearers, a tight-knit cabal of warriors known as the Bloodsworn. Enusat knew them by reputation. Veterans of Calth, they were the elite of the Third Host, its most favoured sons. The plates of their armour were archaic and ornate, stylised to resemble snarling daemons and gargoyles, and they were liberally hung with trophies, chains and religious icons. Their mouths had been ritually sutured shut with thick consecrated wires. Enusat was no psyker, and his connection to the warp was weaker than many within the Host, yet even so he could feel the presence of fettered daemons lurking within the souls of the Bloodsworn. They were potent warriors, indeed and they were only five.

Five veterans, perhaps all that remained of the Third Host. Enusat could well understand Nahrens simmering rage.

Contact had been made, however, with the snub-nosed tug vessel. It had identified itself as the Deaths Head, using old, pre-Isstvan Legion codes. In truth, it had only been those codes that had forestalled his masters hand. The Dark Apostle had been intrigued.

Explain yourself, Death Guard, said Kol Badar, speaking into the vox-link. The Vox Dominus is a holy vessel of the Seventeenth Legion. Explain to us how you justify claiming it as salvage.

The reply was slow in coming, delayed by distance and warp interference. The distorted face on screen crackled and blurred, but the grimace it displayed might once have been classed as a smile, back when the malformed face had been capable of such an expression. Its shoulders rose and fell, and a horrible croak bubbled from the vox-unit.

Hor hor hor.

Do I hear this wretched creature right? asked Dark Apostle Nahren. Is it laughing at us? Truly?

Our patience wears thin, Death Guard, said Kol Badar. Explain yourself. Why is it that we cannot make contact with the Vox Dominus? And how is it that you dare claim a holy vessel of the Seventeenth Legion as salvage?

The creature's mouth or what was left of it began to move. Its rasping voice rattled through the vox-unit a moment later, completely out of synch with the movement.

Most esteemed brethren of the

Seventeenth, croaked the voice, I fear you must be

mistaken. The words were slow and drawn out, deep and wet. It reminded Marduk of a corpse's death rattle. My soul-brothers and I

came upon this vessel, that which

. which you declaim as the

Vox Dominus

adrift, lost. Lifeless

Lifeless? erupted Nahren. What do you mean by that?

I can

perceive that our

brethren of the Seventeenth appear vexed by this revelation, spoke the Death Guard legionary. It was difficult to judge if his voice was being affected by the poor communication link, or if he actually spoke in this drawn-out, painful manner. Somehow, Marduk suspected the latter. Nevertheless, it is

with

urgh

assurances most sincere that I present unto you the
truth of the matter.

We waste our time communing with this rotting fool, said Nahren under his
breath. Let us be done with it, and quickly.

Marduk bowed his head in appeasement. Of course, Dark Apostle, he said,
soothingly. Once we have established under what circumstances these
scavengers came upon the Vox Dominus, we will, of course, ensure you are
quickly reunited with your Host.

The Death Guard legionary continued on, unaware or uncaring of the
interruption.

came upon the ship, adrift in the warp unclaimed
moribund. Flotsam, nought but flotsam. Jetsam drifting
on the tides of the god-sea. All attempts

urgh

were made to contact any remaining crew

gnrrrr

. No response forth came.

This creature is insufferable, said Kol Badar, muting his words so that they were not relayed. And to think we once called them brothers.

They are still our brothers, said Marduk. They are the blessed children of Grandfather Nurgle, living embodiments of His favour. They are worthy of our respect, though they are clearly misguided in attempting to claim that which is not theirs to claim.

What does he mean, adrift in the warp? asked Enusat. The Vox Dominus was only gone for a matter of minutes.

One minute and twenty-seven seconds, adjusted, said Kol Badar.

Re-open the vox, said Nahren. Kol Badars gaze flicked to Marduk, who nodded almost imperceptibly. A slight smile tinged his lips as he saw Nahren bristle. No Dark Apostle liked having his orders questioned.

Why is it, Nahren said, addressing the pixelated, distorted image of the XIV Legion warrior, that you claim the Vox Dominus was lifeless and floating adrift when we all know that is a lie?

The Death Guard continued to chuckle. It was a horrible wet sound akin to some monstrous amphibian croaking. Or dying. Enusat could not decide.

Hor hor hor.

It mocks us, said Nahren. Bring your broadsides to bear. They have no void shields. They will soon change their tone.

Do not seek to give me orders, said Marduk. You are a guest upon my bridge, Nahren, nothing more.

Nahrens dark eyes locked on to Marduks. Across the vox, the Death Guards chuckle deepened, before descending into a hacking wet cough.

Hor hor urgh.

Why is it that you laugh, Death Guard? snarled Kol Badar.

The Vox Dominus has been gone

urgh

far longer than you seem to understand, drawled the foul figure filling the viewscreen.

How long? said Marduk, turning away from Nahrens wrathful gaze.

The Death Guards answer silenced the bridge.

In excess of... three thousand years.

The Invisus was an ugly brute of a gunship, considerably smaller than a Stormbird. The Host had salvaged it a century earlier during a fire-fight with Red Corsair renegades on the fringe of the Maelstrom. Its paintwork was blistered, peeling and blackened by fire. Hooks and barbs protruded in rows down its body, like the spines of some feral world beast.

Once, perhaps, it had been nothing more than a cargo-transport, most probably designed to transport mining goods from worlds located precariously close to the borders of reality. In the years since, however, it had undergone considerable modification. The Corsairs had outfitted it with heavy armour plates and shield banks, though it was unarmed but for a pair of forward-mounted lascannons jutting from beneath its nose. It was more a shuttle than a warship.

Though far from the most elegant or powerful of vessels, it had served the Host well since its capture. It had been honoured with the name Invisus and infused with a daemonic entity of a lesser pantheon, giving it a limited, belligerent sentience.

Marduk had a certain affection for it, though he knew it well enough not to fully trust it. It had learned to fear him, but he had no doubt that it would turn on him if it was ever presented with the opportunity. The trick was not to give it that chance. The notion did not overly concern him. It kept things interesting.

The Invisuss engines gave a throaty growl as fresh blood was smeared across the underside of its fuselage. The wretched attendants undertaking this task hissed and jabbered under their breath as they worked, their repulsive bodies hidden beneath coarse black cloaks and cowls.

Several of the Hosts warriors were moving around the exterior of the Invisus, chanting monotonously as they swung heavy censers back and forth. Thick clouds of incense infused with mind-altering herbs and bone dust billowed out in their wake, curling around the gunship like living tendrils, caressing it and infusing its being.

Marduk cut a jagged gash across his left palm, clenching and unclenching his hand into a fist to get the blood flowing. Intoning a benediction, he placed his bloody handprint upon the face of each of the Hosts warriors who had been chosen to board the Vox Dominus. What they would find was anybody's guess.

Nahren had already boarded his own shuttle, the Lux Aeterna, impatient to be away, but Marduk would not be hurried.

Eighteen warrior brothers received the Dark Apostles blessing, kneeling before him in turn. Enusat was not present, though the Hosts new First Acolyte was accompanying the boarding party. He had already received Marduks blessing, and was hooked into the pilots throne on the Invisus, joining with it and preparing for launch.

Last to receive Marduks bloody handprint was Kol Badar. The Coryphaeus stepped forwards to receive his blessing, his thick features set in his customary snarl.

Earlier, Marduk had announced his intention to join the boarding party himself.

You cannot, the Coryphaeus had said with typical bluntness. You are the Hosts Dark Apostle and you are of the Council. We have already lost the Third. The Legion can ill afford to lose two of its Apostles as well.

I appreciate your intent, Marduk, said Nahren. But I agree with your Coryphaeus.

I would not wish it said that I would not aid a fellow Apostle, said Marduk.

Your aid is appreciated, said Nahren. Let your First Acolyte go in your stead. It would do your Host good to see your faith in him.

Marduk had bowed his head in respect.

It shall be as you suggest, old master, he said. The old fool, he thought. That had

been easier that he could ever have predicted.

Kol Badar closed his eyes to receive Marduks blessing. The Dark Apostle placed his hand upon the Coryphauss face, murmuring an orison of blessing. The bloody handprint dried almost instantly upon his flesh, the hyper-coagulants within doing their work.

I say again, this is folly, said Kol Badar, as Marduk pulled his bloody hand away from the towering warriors face.

I agree, said Marduk. This is a mummies farce. But I must be seen to make an effort. And there are relics on board. Weapons. Armour. Ammunition. We cannot simply abandon the ship to the Death Guard.

No good will come of it, Kol Badar had said. Mark my words. But I will do as you order, Apostle.

If it is as the Death Guard suggested, salvage what you can. If the ship is still in working order we will give Nahren a skeleton crew and he can limp back to Sicarus with his tail between his legs, said Marduk. We will continue on without him.

You think the Death Guard will stand by idly while we do this? asked Kol Badar. The Fourteenth Legion are stubborn. They will not relinquish their prize easily.

Then you must convince them, Marduk said. He wiped his hand upon his tabard. Already the wound was sealed. He accepted his spike-knuckled gauntlet, held out to him by a hunched, black-robed attendant, and secured it back over his hand. He felt it join with his flesh, and felt once again complete.

There is something you are not telling me, said Kol Badar, his voice low.

You know me too well, said Marduk.

I am starting to. Well? What is it you are scheming?

Something that will bring the Thirty-Fourth great power.

The Thirty-Fourth, or you?

They are one and the same, are they not? Marduk said with a smile. A Host is only as strong as its Apostle.

Kol Badar grunted noncommittally.

It is best that you do not know, said Marduk, dropping his smile. But be ready. It may come to pass that there will be the need to spill our brothers blood.

The Fourteenths? Or Nahrens?

It would be wise to be ready for any eventuality.

Kol Badar bowed his head in ascent. As you will it, he said.

Go with the gods, bearer of the word, said Marduk. Kol Badar bowed his head again, then turned and strode away. The Invisuss assault ramp sealed behind him with a resounding crash, and the gunships engine whine rose to an ear-splitting scream.

The Lux Aeterna was the first to leave, launching into the void without further delay. Flames roared as the Invisus rose from the deck and rotated slowly to face the gaping aperture of the launch bay. A glistening, nigh invisible skin was all that kept the roiling madness beyond at bay.

With a braying roar, the shuttle jolted forwards. It slipped effortlessly through the insubstantial barrier, sending ripples across its surface. Half a dozen nimble fighters followed, darting out to act as escort. Within moments, they were gone, swallowed by the void.

Once they were gone, Marduk signalled to Sabtec, the most senior warrior-brother of the Host that had not left with Nahren.

It is time, said Marduk.

Are you sure she will be on board? asked Sabtec.

She is, answered Marduk. And she is waiting for me.

The Vox Dominus filled their vision as the shuttle approached. It was easy to believe, looking upon it up close, that the ship had weathered three thousand

years adrift in the warp as the Death Guard claimed.

Easy for the First Acolyte to believe, at any rate Dark Apostle Nahren steadfastly refused to countenance the Death Guards claim.

The thick armoured plating of the Vox Dominus was heavily corroded, to such a degree in places that the exterior of the ship had been completely eaten away, exposing its dark interior. Rust and verdigris covered those cannon batteries that could be seen; most were completely obscured by strange orange-hued growths. If the ship had lain upon an ocean bed for hundreds of years and dredged up, Enusat imagined it would resemble something like this. It was a decrepit and pitiful shadow of its former glory.

The First Acolyte peered at it through the metre-thick armourglass as he piloted the Invisus. The curved window distorted the Vox Dominus strangely.

No evidence of battle damage, he noted.

No evidence of any life, either, said Kol Badar from behind him.

That does not mean the Third Host is dead, said Enusat. The Dark Apostle believes we may yet find survivors.

I would not hold my breath, said Kol Badar.

Nor I, said Enusat.

The battleship was in a serious state of decay, but there were none of the telltale las-burns, nor the gaping rents that void-torpedoes or cannon broadsides would inflict, to indicate conflict. The only wounds that the immense ship seemed to have were those caused by the passage of time.

Just ahead of the Invisus, Dark Apostle Nahrens shuttle tracked to starboard, stabiliser jets firing. Target locks flashed in front of Enusats retinas, and there was an angry buzzing in the back of his head. The dark soul of the shuttle was urging him to squeeze off a burst of fire at the other ship. He blinked the targeting reticule away, reasserting his dominance. It was always this way with the Invisus. It delighted in testing him.

The two ships were running along the ventral embarkation decks of the Vox

Dominus now, checking each in turn. Some onboard systems seemed to remain in operation, and Dark Apostle Nahren believed it might be possible to lift one of the hangar bay shields remotely. Enusat pulled the Invisus in behind the other shuttle, following its lead.

Enusat did not feel it likely that they would find an operational hangar, but he was proven wrong. After manoeuvring beneath the rotting carcass of the Vox Dominus to check the lower aft launch bays, they found what they sought.

The two shuttles drew level beyond the shield of a launch deck on the lower aft side. Its surface was pitted and scarred. Limpet-like growths clung to it.

They look organic, said Kol Badar, and Enusat was forced to agree. Few living things could withstand lengthy exposure to the void, but it was not unheard of, especially on the shore of the Ocean of Souls.

At a remote impulse from the Lux Aeterna, the immense docking bay began to open. The void rendered the movement perfectly silent, but Enusat could imagine the groan of tortured metal as it lifted for the first time in the gods alone knew how long. Millennia, it seemed.

To Enusats surprise, the decks shimmering integrity field remained intact. It held the vacuum of space at bay, glistening like quicksilver. The Lux Aeterna passed through, causing it to ripple like the surface of a lake.

Enusat turned in his pilot throne, his movement tugging at the ribbed cables connecting him to the shuttles controls. Kol Badar stood behind him, his lupine face up-lit by the red internal glow of his revered Terminator armour. The Coryphaus gave a slow nod.

Follow them in, he said.

By your command, said Enusat. He turned and settled back into the embrace of the shuttles worn, human-leather seat. He eased the shuttles controls forwards, feeling the ships dark soul buzzing in his mind. The Invisus was uneasy. Did it sense something that their sensors could not, Enusat wondered? The thought departed as quickly as it had come. To linger on doubt was not in his character.

The Invisus slipped through the shimmering field. The embarkation deck was cavernous and as dark as the pits of Hades. That was not some empty metaphor,

either. Enusat had been to Hades, and it was indeed rather dark.

The shuttles runner-lights panned left and right. The air was thick with particles. Dust perhaps.

And lo, the Faithful entered the Cimmerian gloom, seeking the Light of Truth, quoted Enusat.

Kol Badar grunted. Where is that from?

The Fifty-Seventh epistle of Mahnarhek the Infested, said Enusat.

Remind me. What happened to the Faithful at the end of that passage? asked Kol Badar.

They were devoured alive, said Enusat, yet in being devoured, they attained true enlightenment.

How comforting, said Kol Badar.

Clear, said Kol Badar, his voice crackling across the vox-network.

With a grunt, Enusat relaxed his grip on his autocannon. Holding it one-handed, he leant it against his shoulder, the long barrel pointing vertically. With his other hand he removed his grilled Mark Three helmet, accompanied by the hiss of equalising pressure.

He breathed in deeply. There was air aboard the Vox Dominus, which he had not expected. It was hot and tasted foul, but it was air nonetheless. The oxygen content was low, low enough that an unaugmented human would have lasted no more than a few minutes at best, but the atmosphere was perfectly survivable for one of the Legiones Astartes.

It was also uncomfortably humid. Rivulets of moisture already ran down the plates of his armour, and he blinked sweat from his eyes.

The Coryphaus had been wrong in his earlier prediction. There was life on the ship. Abundant and verdant life. It just was not the life that they were seeking.

It clung to the walls and hung low from the ceilings. The ground underfoot was

soft, spongy and uneven. It was a veritable forest of fungus, lichen and moss, and it transformed the interior of the Vox Dominus into an otherworldly jungle, more akin to a death world than the belly of a battleship.

It was bewildering in its diversity. Pallid stalks rose from the ground in dense clusters, reaching towards the ceiling like saplings seeking sunlight. Stinking polyps the colour of diseased liver protruded from between fan-like fronds as delicate as lace. Bulging brain-like sponges covered in fuzz grew atop spotted stems. Coral-like clusters grew alongside oddly shaped stinkhorns and earth-tongues, each one more wildly coloured than the last. Puddles of water collected in hollows, filled with brightly coloured algal blooms likely the source of the oxygen that Enusat now breathed.

The only light on the deck came from the void, a diffuse orange-red glow, and from pockets of glowing phosphorescent fungi. These clusters resembled undersea anemones, with tiny finger-like protuberances waving gently in the air.

Even now the deck had been declared clear, the warriors of the Thirty-Fourth Host moved warily through the transformed embarkation deck, bolters and chainswords at the ready.

This has the air of the plague god about it, said Kol Badar. His voice was a harsh growl, distorted by his quad-tusked helmet, giving it a crackling, mechanical quality.

Enusat glanced across the deck to Nahren. The Dark Apostle stood motionless, staring around him, his face a mask of controlled fury. He held his immense crozius in a tight, two-handed grip, its spiked head crackling, as if it embodied his hatred. He looked ready to brain someone.

It would seem the Dark Apostle of the Third Host has come to the same conclusion, said Enusat.

Nahrens bodyguard, the Bloodsworn, stood in a rough circle around their master. Each wore a horned helmet with the skin of a human face grotesquely stretched over its faceplate, and they were armed with an eclectic mix of weapons: chainaxes, power blades, bolters and plasma weaponry. Some of those veterans, Marduk had told him, were possessed by more than a single entity even unarmed they would be dangerous foes.

If there were survivors on board, they would have come to meet us, said Kol Badar. Well find nothing here but death.

Enusat was inclined to agree.

Come, First Acolyte, Kol Badar continued. Lets see what the Apostle has in mind now that hes seen this desolation with his own eyes.

The Bloodsworn bristled as they approached, feral growls rumbling forth from the vocalisers of their helmets. It was probably the only sound they could make with their mouths sewn shut, Enusat thought.

Their conversational skills must make the months of warp-transit just fly by, he said in a low voice, eliciting a snort from the Terminator-armoured Coryphaus. His helmet transformed it into a harsh blurt of distortion.

The Bloodsworn stepped protectively in front of their Dark Apostle, weapons raised. Enusat, his helmet secured at his hip, resisted the urge to turn his autocannon on them. It would not be wise to antagonise the Dark Apostle or his bodyguard when they were already close to snapping. A single spark, and they would erupt. Nevertheless, he refused to be intimidated.

An ugly smile split his mangled face, exposing his gleaming black-steel teeth. He couldnt help it. Part of him longed to test himself against these veterans.

He and Kol Badar stopped a few steps back from the Bloodsworn, staring down the barrels of their live weapons. If Enusat had been wearing his helmet, warning runes would have been flashing before his eyes, keying him into the targeters locked on him.

Call your pups off, Apostle, growled the Coryphaus, or Ill be forced to put them on a leash.

Nahren stared up at Kol Badar. He looked ready to strike the Coryphaus, but after a moment, with an oppugnant lack of urgency, he gave the command for his Bloodsworn to stand down. Enusat was almost disappointed.

The Dark Apostle spoke the order in the tongue of daemons. The harsh, unnatural sound was like a punch in the face. The Bloodsworn responded instantly, easing back and turning their weapons away from the two warriors of

the Thirty-Fourth Host.

What now, Apostle? I have no wish to risk my warriors here any longer than necessary.

Cowardice, snarled Nahren.

Enusat saw a vein at Kol Badars temple twitch, and his expression hardened.

The anomaly could reappear at any moment and claim us, as it has already claimed your Host, said Kol Badar.

We do not leave until I have answers.

You command the Third Host, Apostle. What is left of it. You do not command the Thirty-Fourth.

I know where I stand in the Legion, snapped Nahren, and it is on a far higher step than the place of any Coryphaus. Even the great Kol Badar. Marduk lent me your strength in good faith. Do not dishonour your Apostle, Coryphaus.

The silence was punctuated by the sounds of water dripping somewhere.

Do not antagonise Nahren, Marduk had said to him before he had left the Infidus Diabolus. Even without a Host, he is dangerous.

There are certainly questions to be answered, said Enusat, seeking to deflect the rising tension.

I would hear how the Death Guard can explain all this, said Nahren, gesturing around them. I would like to see if they dare speak their lies to my face. Lets ask them, shall we?

Kol Badars expression was dark but, somewhat grudgingly, he opened up a vox-link to the sleek fighters that had escorted them across the expanse separating the Vox Dominus and the Infidus Diabolus.

Bring them in, he said.

There they go, said Sabtec, gesturing to the glowing map before them. It is just

as you predicted.

He was stood with Marduk overlooking the small, portable strategic display. Behind them, his squad made ready for battle, checking weapons and ammunition as they filed onto the small shuttle, once a smugglers vessel, small and discreet. Heavy machinery was being loaded on board, along with a floating casket guided by robed attendants.

A small, ruby-red icon had appeared alongside the larger three-dimensional representation of the Death Guard vessel on the glass tablet. The small icon flashed as it moved away from its larger parent ship.

Good, said Marduk. Prep the engines. I want us launched the moment the Death Guard set foot aboard the Vox Dominus.

It will be as you wish, said Sabtec.

I want the Deaths Head silenced, said Marduk. I do not want the Death Guard knowing what we are doing until the deed is done.

They will not know we are upon them until the last moment, said Sabtec. And by then it will be too late.

Inbound, said Kol Badar. Be ready.

Enusat planted himself behind a rockcrete barrier designed to protect against engine blast. The position was located centrally, allowing him to cover virtually the entirety of the embarkation deck. His legs were set wide in a braced position, and the stabilisers in his greaves hummed softly, working to keep him locked in place, ready to compensate for the weapons monstrous recoil.

His wore his helmet once more, having tired of the heady stink and heat of the ships interior. A flood of information was presented before his eyes. He blink-clicked through external diagnostics displaying temperature, humidity and the chemical breakdown of the air, and on through logistical data including heat-sink readouts, ammunition updates and energy-strain. Tactical readouts presented themselves to him, analysing the heart-rate and life-functions of his warrior-brothers. A crosshair matrix followed where his eyes focused, eagerly seeking a target.

The barrel of his beloved high-calibre weapon was almost two metres in length, most of which was encased in a perforated barrel ventilation shroud. An underslung chainblade bayonet protruded a further half-metre beyond the snarling daemon that formed the weapons wide-bore muzzle.

The autocannon was hung with fetishes and religious icons, and its bulky casing was inscribed with holy passages from the Book of Lorgar. A heavy chain shoulder-strap locked over Enusats shoulder, taking the weapons considerable weight, aided by internal servos.

His right hand clasped the weapons grip, thumb resting lightly on its firing mechanism. He guided the autocannons direction with his left hand, grasping the handle atop the weapons casing. Suspensors lightened the load, and the servo-bundles built into his armour made him able to heft the immense weapon as easily as an unaugmented mortal would a rifle.

The autocannon was belt-fed from Enusats oversized backpack, which acted as an ammunition reservoir as well as the power source for his armour. The ammunition feed was protected by a flexible casing. While not capable of such a high rate of fire as a heavy bolter, his weapon was far more powerful, able to rip through rockcrete and vehicle plating like paper.

The other warriors of the Thirty-Fourth and the Third Hosts had taken up defensive positions, hugging the Invisus and the Lux Aeterna, and taking advantage of the cover provided by the overgrown embarkation deck. Bolters were held at the ready, and warriors knelt at the corners of armoured bulwarks half hidden by fungal overgrowth.

Dark Apostle Nahren stood out in the open, awaiting the arrival of the inbound Death Guard shuttle. The Bloodsworn stood with them, as did Kol Badar, an implacable bulwark of heavy armour and belligerence. The bladed lengths of his power talons clicked against each other as he waited.

Enusat revved his autocannons underslung chainblade, and black smoke rose from its engine.

The Death Guard shuttle resembled some kind of repulsive insect, bloated to gigantic proportions, as it passed through the embarkation decks shimmering integrity field.

Every panel of the ship was heavily worn, pitted, and dented. Rust and corrosion encrusted its armour plates, and in places it looked like the rot had eaten completely through the hull. Enusat was surprised it was even void-worthy.

The dilapidated ships weapons looked very serviceable, however, and they rotated freely in their turrets, sweeping across the Word Bearers arrayed to greet it. Each time they swept over him, a host of warning runes flashed up before Enusats eyes. He heard the Invisus growl like an angry beast. Its weapons were trained upon this newcomer, this rival, and it longed to assert its dominance.

Hold your fire, said Enusat, both to the Word Bearers of the Thirty-Fourth and the gunship. He could not speak for Nahren or the Bloodsworn, of course.

The hull of the Death Guards shuttle was bulbous, and it was held aloft upon a large pair of circular jets. Those jets were rotated downwards now, making the air shimmer with their heat as it hovered slowly forwards, inching its way into the embarkation deck.

The windows of its dual cockpit were convex and bulging. They seemed to be made up of thousands of tiny octagonal segments, making them resemble the compound eyes of an arthropod. While the hull of the shuttle was the grey-green colour of a bloated, water-logged corpse, and covered in sections of scabrous rust and corrosion, those eyes were a deep and iridescent amber.

The corroded ship settled to the deck in the space between the Invisus and the Lux Aeterna, seven insectile legs unfolding to take its weight. They looked far too slender to support its bulk, and the metal was rusted and befouled, but they held, keeping the ships hull some three metres off the deck.

There was a shuddering groan, and a crack appeared in the bloated underside of the ship. Sickening yellow smoke poured from within. It hit the ground and spread outwards, concealing the deck in low fog.

The noxious vapour lapped around the legs of Nahren, Kol Badar and the Bloodsworn. Even fifteen metres away, the high levels of toxicity and acidity of the fog registered on Enusats auto-sensors.

The crack in the ships underside continued to expand like a gaping wound, gradually resolving itself into a slowly descending boarding ramp. Thick, saliva-like strands stretched out between the separating sections and dripped to the deck

like thick syrup.

The ramp settled with an audible groan. There was a sharp hiss as an internal airlock was released, and the air was suddenly filled with the buzzing of insects. A dense cloud spewed from within the shuttle.

Most of the insects were small, but some of the revolting creatures were the size of a mans fist. Their bloated abdomens hung low beneath glistening carapaces and foulness dripped from their engorged probosces.

The cloud expanded like a dark shadow to engulf the warrior-brothers of the XVIIth Legion. Enusat was suddenly very glad he was wearing his helmet. Of the Word Bearers, only Dark Apostle Nahren was bare-headed. Fat, crawling flies with gleaming, multi-faceted eyes settled upon his face, but the Dark Apostle paid them no mind. The Plague Father was a part of the Ruinous pantheon, and the Word Bearers honoured him as they honoured all the Greater Powers.

The cloud of flies continued to expand, dissipating somewhat as they spread out, though a thick mass of them remained buzzing around the shuttles now lowered boarding ramp. That was where Enusat focused. Crosshair reticules followed the movement of his iris as he searched for a target through the cloying smoke and buzzing insects.

Then he saw them.

A host of red targeting icons lit up before him.

Contact, he growled.

I see them, said Kol Badar.

The threat-registers resolved into bulky, power-armoured silhouettes advancing slowly down the embarkation ramp. Enusats finger tensed on the trigger.

The Death Guard stepped onto the deck of the Vox Dominus.

Launch, ordered Sabtec, and the sleek, black-sided shuttle eased itself from the embarkation deck.

Its cogitators had been working frantically. Three servitors slaved to the devices had been burned out, their organic systems failing with massive subdural haemorrhaging, but the calculations had been completed successfully. Marduk hoped and had been input into the shuttles nav-cortex. Both the Infidus Diabolus and the Deaths Head were moving; the trajectory calculation had to be perfect.

After three short bursts of stabilising jets to set them on the right course, the shuttle went dead, all of its systems shut down. It became nothing more than a lifeless piece of flotsam, like so many others floating in the void, though one that was moving on a perfect collision course with the Deaths Head.

Their progress through the vacant, orange-hued expanse was slow. They did not want to warn the Deaths Head of their approach and would not make contact for several hours.

The Word Bearers settled themselves and calmed their breathing as the oxygen cut off and the temperature began to plummet.

A hint of a smile curled the corner of Marduks lips.

Nargalax. That was the name he gave them. It was not the moniker he had borne upon his home world of Barbarus, nor the cult name he had been given upon indoctrination into the Death Guard. Rather, it was the name that the Plague Father had gifted him; the name he had taken on after his infestation.

While Enusat acknowledged that he was not exactly pleasing on the eye, he was nevertheless a vision of classical grace and nobility next to the bloated living corpse that called itself leader of this piratical band of diseased legionaries.

His appearance, however, was not repugnant to Enusat. It was, after all, the blessings of the Plague Father that had wrought this change upon the Death Guards physical body. In truth, he was more fascinated than repulsed. It was amazing to him that anything could be this riddled with disease and corruption and yet still live. Truly, Nargalax wore the blessings of the gods upon his flesh.

His armour would once have been bone-white, but now it was slick with filth and discoloured an unhealthy shade the colour of a rotting cadaver. His body was grossly swollen, and his armour was cracked and split, unable to fully contain his foetid bulk. Pustules and sores had ruptured across its surfaces, weeping foul-smelling blood and pus. Segmented cables, filth-encrusted and wet, protruded

from his body like ropes of intestines, and bony spines protruded along the edges of his armour. It was difficult to say where his plate truly finished and flesh began. Enusat guessed that they had become as one.

An array of rotten heads hung at his waist, their eyes, mouths, nostrils and neck stumps stitched and waxed shut. They hung alongside a mace, a barbaric weapon that had a corroded, curved blade protruding from its heavy weighted head. A double-barrelled combi-bolter was mag-locked at his side.

It was only when the Death Guard reached for his helmet that Enusat noticed his mutation. A thick, segmented tentacle had sprouted from his left tricep, growing from a rupture in his armour. It was the colour of dead flesh and covered in a thick layer of mucus.

With the aid of this grotesque tentacle, and accompanied by a sickly sucking sound of protest, Nargalax had removed his single-horned helmet to reveal his bloated corpse-face.

On the Imperial mausoleum planet of Cerberus IV, the river Acherus had been choked with the bodies of dead Guardsmen. By the end of the siege there had been so many bodies there that it had been possible for the Hosts Rhinos and Land Raiders to cross the river and enter the prime city even though the bone-bridge had been destroyed. Nargalax's face reminded Enusat of those drowned Guardsmen, both in colour and the manner in which it was bloated.

His flesh was pallid and sickly, and the dark purple bruising of congealed blood spread like stains beneath his leprous skin. Most of his mouth and jaw were missing, replaced by a mass of tubes and pipes. His left eye was swollen and misshapen, filled with styes, milky, and leaking. As soon as he had removed his helmet, a cluster of tiny flies had settled there to feed upon that fluid. Movement rippled beneath his necrotised flesh. As Enusat watched, several wriggling maggots emerged from the corner of that eye, like pallid tears.

More feeder pipes and cables were crudely drilled into his temples and at the back of his skull, and the flesh around their entry points was dead and foul. Patches of wispy grey hair still clung to the left side of his rotting scalp, hanging past his shoulders, perhaps a last concession to vanity. The Death Guards skin rippled with movement from within maggots and worms fed upon his rotten flesh.

Yet perhaps the most off-putting of Nargalax's features was his right eye. It was the stark blue of flawless glacial ice, completely untouched by disease or taint. It was clear and bold, and offered an indication as to what he might have looked like before the touch of the Plague Father had claimed him.

It was not so much the eye itself that was disturbing, for it was perfect, but rather the contrast it represented, staring out from its sunken socket in the face of a bloated cadaver. Its perfection seemed to make everything else that much more foul.

The only strange thing about it was its pupil, which looked more like three overlapping pupils joined as one. For all the misery that had afflicted Nargalax's flesh, his one clear eye was always laughing, even if what was left of his mouth could not. Creases formed readily at its corner.

There were seven legionaries of the Death Guard accompanying their foetid captain, rotting flesh in the shape of warriors of the Legiones Astartes. Enusat was certain that if their armour could be pried loose, they would collapse into a formless, rotting mass. Sores upon their rotten, fleshy armoured plates wept with pus, blood and oil. Their foul secretions pooled beneath their cloven-toed boots, spreading out onto the algae-slick floor. Insects and plant life fed upon the foulness they deposited.

Each of them held a corroded bolter across his chest. Enusat was amazed the weapons still worked.

Even before the Death Guard had given themselves over to Nurgle, they had a reputation as implacable warriors, able to endure punishment far beyond that of the other Legions. Relentless, unbreakable and as unstoppable as an incoming tide that had been the defining characteristics of the Legion before they had thrown in their lot with the Plague Father, and his touch upon them had exaggerated these qualities even further.

The seven were not alone. Mortals accompanied the Death Guard, creeping out from their shuttle in the wake of their immense masters. They were wretched, repulsive creatures, all of them in various stages of decomposition. The Word Bearers were shocked and disgusted that they did not appear to be slaves and servants, and that Nargalax spoke of them in fatherly tones. His flock, he called them; the afflicted. Dark Apostle Nahren made no attempt to hide his disdain. It

was the way of the Word Bearers to look upon mortals as cattle, to be used and dominated, not to be treated as anything even close to approaching equal, which was how Nargalax seemed to regard these worthless meat sacks.

There were a score of them, a ragged militia that bore a range of crude weapons. Most carried autoguns and lasguns in various states of repair, while others cradled little more than stub guns and cudgels. Many of them wore what were clearly Imperial-issue flak vests and helmets. Deserters, no doubt. All wore breathing apparatus, mostly full-faced black masks with circular goggles filled with a glowing green fog. They stared out through that mire with pallid, corrupted eyes filled with cataracts and cancers.

All were human or a close approximation, but for one brute that stood taller than even the legionaries. It was a hulking mass of vat-grown muscle and brutality, bedecked with an oversized gasmask pulled over its disproportionately small head. One of its arms had been replaced with an immense rotator drill. The weight of the heavy machinery gave the creature an awkward, lopsided posture. Kol Badar stared at that one with narrowed eyes, and he flexed his power talons.

Hor hor hor.

It was a horrid wet sound akin to a death rattle, and Nahrens grip on his holy crozius tightened at the sound. Enusat tensed, half expecting, half hoping that the Dark Apostle would lash out. He was a little disappointed when he did not.

Tell me where my Host is, Death Guard, said Nahren.

Nargalax was still chuckling as he answered.

If it did not leave the ship, he drawled, his voice slow and ponderous, then it is still here.

You know more than you are offering, creature.

The Chaplain does not listen, no, said Nargalax, still chuckling. His voice was hollow and painfully slow, croaking forth from a rusted vox-grille set into his throat. This is not our work, I pray and confirm. Neither I, nor any of my brethren have stepped aboard this hallowed vessel, not until now. I can confirm that

urgh

and pledge my honour against the claim.

Yet this is your patrons work. You would not deny that, would you?

So it would seem, so it would seem, drawled Nargalax, his good eye laughing. The Grandfathers pestilential touch is here, yes. But it is so wherever there is rot and decay. My brethren and I cannot

be held accountable for all His great works, no? We found your vessel abandoned, lifeless, drifting. It did not respond to our vox-hails. Hence

we merely sought to tow it to a safer location before we investigated further. There was a disturbance in the warp, and we were drawn through. And here we are, accused of piracy and worse. He laughed again, deep and slow, making his whole body shake. I wish it were not so

but I have no more knowledge of the whereabouts of your kin than you.

You lie, said Nahren.

Nargalax shrugged. You see what you choose to see, little Chaplain, he said. But I do not lie.

Enusat believed him. He also believed that the Death Guard knew more than he was offering.

I must get to the bridge, Nahren said, turning away from Nargalax to speak to Kol Badar.

Why? asked Kol Badar.

I must know the truth. This creature, said Nahren, gesturing contemptuously towards Nargalax, will accompany me. It will be the first to die if it has spoken any falsehoods.

The Death Guard merely laughed.

The First Acolyte of the Thirty-Fourth will join me as well, added Nahren.

Me, Apostle? asked Enusat.

I would not have the Thirty-Fourth leave without me, said Nahren, still addressing Kol Badar, ignoring Enusat completely. I trust that Marduk would not wish to have to find yet another First Acolyte

They pressed forwards through corridors so filled with fungal life that it was easy to forget they were on a ship at all. They were completely cut off, and lost contact with those on the embarkation deck within minutes.

Only a small group was pressing on into the infested interior of the Vox Dominus: Dark Apostle Nahren, his five mute Bloodsworn and Enusat, providing them with support in the form of his heavy autocannon. Lastly, the Death Guard captain Nargalax marched with them. Seven they were, in all.

An auspicious number, said Nargalax. Grandfather Nurgle... would be pleased.

He was a hostage, little more, and Nahren had promised him a painful death if any evidence came to light of his involvement in the disappearance of his Host and the defilement of the Vox Dominus itself.

The Death Guard captain had only laughed, deep and long hor hor hor and told him that there was no pain that could be inflicted upon his flesh that would cause him any discomfort.

You'd scratch an itch, and I'd thank you for it, he had said. Nevertheless, the Death Guard acquiesced to the Dark Apostles demand, willingly it seemed to Enusat.

They walked single file, yet even so, the going was difficult and slow. In places their route was so overgrown that they had to cut a path, and soon their blades dripped with milky ichor and burning sap. Elsewhere they cleared their way with controlled bursts of promethium fire. Enusat had wondered if that would provoke a reaction from Nargalax, but it hadn't. The Death Guard captain appeared unmoved, even as huge centipedes and crawling insects squealed and writhed in their death throes, flames boiling their innards.

Their advance was all the slower for the presence of Nargalax. He would not be

hurried. Enusat doubted he could be hurried. Each step was heavy and laboured. It reminded Enusat of the way the immense machines of the Collegia Titanica moved slow yet powerful and unstoppable. Nargalax was heavy, ungodly heavy. Anything beneath his tread was crushed. His movement was as inexorable as an incoming tide. Fungus browned and withered wherever he trod, and Enusat was careful not to step upon any of the toxic secretions that he left in his wake.

Enusat walked behind him, and was glad once again for his helmet. Bloated flies and biting insects hung around the Death Guard captain in a dense swarm, and he was certain that his stink would have been repellent. How Nahren and the Bloodsworn stood it was beyond him. Already the Bloodsworn sported a florid array of bites and sores upon their flesh.

The minutes dragged into hours, and still they pushed on into the darkness, trudging through the overgrown corridors to reach their destination. It got hotter and more humid as they continued deeper into the interior of the Vox Dominus. It was obvious that Nahrens patience was wearing thin at their ponderous pace, but there was little the Dark Apostle could do to hasten their advance.

At last they reached their destination: the ships bridge. The immense blast doors leading inside were sealed.

That could be a good sign, said Enusat, though he didnt believe his own words. The doors were almost completely concealed beneath moss and hanging lichen. Clumps of bulbous fungi protruded from their surface like tumours. The doors had been designed to withstand considerable attack from without in the event of a boarding action, and lacking las-cutters and seismic hammers, it would take some time for the party to gain access.

They would have to make do with what they had. Thankfully, Enusat knew that these blast doors were nowhere near as thick as those of the vessels of the Imperial Navy, or xenos species. This was a ship that had been designed for use by the Legiones Astartes. Few would dare launch a boarding party against the Word Bearers, and if they did and were successful enough to fight their way to the bridge then the battle was already lost. The XVIIth put their trust in their bolters and blades, and their faith not barriers of plasteel and adamantium.

Melta-charges, ordered Nahren. Several of his Bloodsworn began cleaning off the overgrowth of fungus and plant life from the blast doors surface, working to

make crevices and joins visible. Others readied and primed the heavy melta-charges they wore at their hips.

They fired in concert. Each had been carefully placed to knock out the locking mechanisms of the blast doors. Super-heated metal ran like lava. Even so, the doors remained shut. Though the locks had been blown, the portal still needed to be physically pried open.

With an inclination of his head, Nahren set the Bloodsworn to work. Their forms suddenly shifted, their bodies blurring and flickering. For a fraction of a second, two beings seemed to inhabit the space where each of the Bloodsworn stood. In some cases, three or more stood as one, their images superimposed over each other. Mighty horns rose from their heads, and eyes filled with burning witch-fire stared forth from shadowy, daemonic faces as the human-skin drawn across their helmets came to life.

Like wax figures before a flame, their bodies softened and changed. Toothy maws tore open upon breastplates, and burning eyes formed, blinking and staring out balefully, in the centre of the Bloodsworn's foreheads. Bony spurs and spines pushed from shoulder plates, kneepads and elbows, curving and jagged. Arms bulged with newly formed musculature, and fingers fused together to form talons and claws, or elongated into whipping tendrils, studded with spikes.

Impressive, said Nargalax.

If I find any evidence in the ship's log of your involvement in this, I will set them on you, Death Guard, promised Nahren. Nargalax merely laughed.

Slender blade arms were thrust into the molten gap at the centre of the blast doors. Hooked claws appeared on either side, gripping tightly, piercing the solid metal skin. Unnatural musculature bulged as the possessed Bloodsworn hauled at the unsecured doors, straining with all their warp-given strength. Clawed talons that had grown from boots gripped the gridded plasteel flooring beneath the bed of lichen and algae underfoot, veins straining fit to rupture as the pack hauled the doors open.

Enusat lowered his autocannon from his shoulder, holding it at the ready, covering the door. The gods alone knew what they would find within.

With a grinding sound of protesting metal, the doors began to move. Shuddering

and squealing, they were pulled back, the four-way aperture parting to reveal a glimpse of the bridge beyond. Yanking and pulling violently, the Bloodsworn managed to open the doors wide enough that they might enter.

Most impressive, said Nargalax.

Like an assassins blade, the black-hulled shuttle closed in on the brutish Deaths Head, which was still attached to the Vox Dominus by an immense chain.

Marduk rose from his meditative trance instantly, alert and ready. Sabtec and the others roused themselves also, running final diagnostics and weapons checks. It was almost time.

The Dark Apostle released the restraints that kept him locked in place, and pushed himself gently from his seat. The artificial gravity had been suspended along with all other systems, and he propelled himself to the front of the ship, using hand-holds to guide his progress.

Sabtec joined him in the cockpit. The Deaths Head loomed before them, growing larger with every passing second.

The calculations were correct, it seems, said Sabtec. Thank the gods they did not change their course. They have not registered us yet.

As if on cue, the Deaths Head made a slight adjustment, turning almost imperceptibly as it began to shift its position. No doubt its crew saw them as some fragment of wreckage or an asteroid, and they were shifting to avoid a collision.

They have now, said Marduk. Lets move.

They were less than a kilometre away when the Deaths Head finally realised what was happening. By then, they were far too close for anything to be done. All the Deaths Head could do was sit and wait to be boarded.

Any hope that had remained that the bridge of the Vox Dominus might somehow have been spared the fate of the rest of the ship was shattered as the group clambered through the half-opened blast doors.

The spores must have spread through the air ducts before the bridge was sealed,

said Enusat.

Spindly mushrooms that glowed with pale, phosphorescent light lit the room. Vividly coloured mould and fungus covered every surface, and hairy strings of lichen hung down in great cascades, linking ceiling to floor. Enusat tracked his autocannon back and forth, seeking a target, but the only movement and life within came from the myriad of disturbed insect-life seething around the fungal growths. He eased his finger off the trigger. The bridge was as dead as the rest of the ship.

Nahren moved straight for the command pulpit. Enusat moved cautiously, ducking beneath an outcrop of fungus the colour of congealed blood. He stepped over thick, rope-like roots, and moved to an overgrown lump that he judged to be a terminal. He brushed aside a metre-long, brightly coloured centipede with a sweep of his arm, and tore at the thick matting of moss. Brushing it away easily, he revealed a small, circular screen. More scraping revealed a control panel, and he began to flick switches and dials. It came as no surprise to him that the screen did not awake.

Nahren was having similar results, it seemed. He swore, and pounded his fist into an oculus viewscreen, cracking it beneath his fury.

This is hopeless, Apostle, Enusat said.

That was when the dead Word Bearer grabbed him.

The blightwood grows, it said.

Daalakath mel caengraal.

PART TWO

The darkness was absolute. All but the barest of life support systems had been shut down on the Infidus Diabolus months earlier. The over-recycled air was low in oxygen and stale. Without the hum of engines or the chanting of the Host, the halls were silent, haunted only by the groan of the ships hull.

We should never have stepped foot aboard the Vox Dominus, said Marduk, a voice in the darkness. You advised me against it. Would that I had listened.

There came no reply. Indeed, the Dark Apostle had expected none.

Nahren would have insisted he go aboard regardless, to see the truth of the Death Guards claim for himself. That was his right. It was not for me to dissuade him. But we should not have followed. The warning signs were there. I was just too blind to see them.

He let out a slow, hissing breath. His hands turned to fists in the darkness.

We should have rained fire upon the rotting hulk of the Vox Dominus, and sent the Death Guard to damnation along with it. They will suffer for this. This is not our fate.

The words sounded hollow and empty.

This is not our fate, he said again, more quietly this time.

Silence was his only answer.

Enusat hadnt seen the figure slumped in the control seat, for it was so covered in fungal growth and moss that it had become one with its surroundings. Nevertheless, he saw it now.

It had no eyes those had long since decomposed but its head turned, and it stared up at him nonetheless, empty sockets boring into him like drills. Its face was wasted and shrunken, the skull clearly visible beneath waxy, pallid skin. Its lips had drawn back, giving it a corpse-grin.

It had hold of his arm. Beneath the covering of moss and a cluster of limpet-like

fungus, he could see that that hand was encased in gore-red plate. This was a brother of the Third Host.

Enusat tried to jerk away, but its grip was cold and deathly strong. It held him like a vice. Its brown, rotten teeth parted, jaw moving, and it spoke.

The blightwood grows, thew-clod, weirwood, horedew, noth.

Daalakath mel caengraal, golakath, mordhka, jakaehesh.

The first voice emerged from the throat of the creature that had once been a Word Bearer, and a cluster of beetles scabbled from its mouth, disturbed by the creaking vocal cords. That voice was low-pitched and hoarse, like a heavy creaking door. The other voice was something far more disturbing; it was the voice of a daemon, something older and more powerful than anything Enusat had ever encountered. It made his flesh creep and his stomach coil.

It grinned at him then, and began dragging him towards it.

Copse and corpse, corpse and copse.

Grinkahtok mal daethmagol, daethmagol mal grinkahtok.

Marduk smiled. The head of his holy crozius was embedded in the head of a mortal, and he pulled it free with a wet sucking sound. He gave it a shake, dislodging the worst of the blood and brain matter.

He surveyed the carnage around him. The ambush had been perfectly executed.

The ship had been drastically undermanned, crewed mostly by mortals that had either been picked up off-world or bred on board. Only three of the Death Guard had been left behind doubtless their captain had taken most of his warriors with him in a pathetic attempt to impress or intimidate.

They had boarded the ship within a minute of discovery, and were killing moments later.

Sabtec pushed a corpse off his blade with a boot, and it slumped lifeless to the floor with the others.

How many? asked Marduk.

Thirty-two kills, answered Sabtec, kneeling to clean his blade on his last victims shirt.

Any injuries of our own?

Nothing of note, said Sabtec.

I sense her nearby, said Marduk. With me. Sabtec rose instantly, moving with the Dark Apostle deeper into the ship. There was not much to it, and it did not take them long.

The strode into a darkened storage deck, and Marduk halted, listening. Lengths of chain hung from plasteel crossbeams overhead, and they swung languorously, clinking musically. Water dripped from somewhere. Marduk turned around on the spot for a moment, then dropped his gaze to the grilled flooring.

There, he said, nodding towards a handle set into the floor.

Sabtec hauled the hatch open. It slammed to the floor with a resounding crash, revealing stairs that descended into darkness.

Marduk made his way down into the gloom. It was a pit, wide and deep, with no exit but the hatch. In a corner of the metal-sided pit cowered a cluster of robed mortals. They were females, a dozen or more of them, and each of them was truly ancient, with withered, frail hands more akin to talons, and matted long white hair. They were blind, their eyes milky, and they whimpered and shook, shielding their hideous crone faces.

A tingling sensation at the back of Marduks head told him he had found the one he sought. Sabtec hissed, and he knew that the warrior could feel it too.

Come out, sweetling, he said, grinning wolfishly. Ill not eat you up.

The harpy flock wailed but parted, leaving just one small figure standing alone.

It was a human child, a girl, no more than four years of age. The tingling became an uncomfortable itch, an insubstantial scratching in the back of Marduks skull. He gritted his teeth, and blood leaked from his eyes, the only tears he could

weep. The girls power was more than he had anticipated.

She wore a dusty grey robe that hid much of her tiny frame. It trailed across the ground behind her. Her hands were hidden in overlarge sleeves, and around her head and shoulders she wore a tightly wound headdress, charcoal grey, leaving just the pale oval circle of her face visible.

Or at least, that was where her face should have been.

Enusat slammed his brick-like fist into the deathly creatures grinning mouth, rocking its head backwards and shattering teeth. Still it did not release its grip. Its head rolled forwards again, grinning toothlessly. He slammed his fist into its face once more, and felt bones shatter beneath the blow. The command throne turned, groaning, and the creature fell to the floor, torn loose from its seat. It left a man-shaped impression behind. Still, it held on to him, like death itself.

Enusat stamped down hard on its arm, finally breaking its grip. From the floor it stared up at him.

Copse and corpse, corpse and copse.

Grinkahtok mal daethmagol, daethmagol mal grinkahtok.

It began to rise. Enusat backed away, lowering his autocannon.

The bridge was alive with movement and shouts of warning as more of the corrupted Word Bearers rose from their overgrown surroundings, rising from thrones and stepping from the walls. They were covered in fungus, perfectly camouflaged until they began to move.

Enusat had his autocannon levelled at the one that had grabbed him as it staggered towards him, grinning manically.

Unseen, another creature emerged behind him, seeming to step right from the wall. The left half of its face was completely obscured by fungal growth. It grabbed him from behind, hands closing on his neck. The one before him was closing in. He squeezed his autocannons trigger, hurling it backwards and splattering gobbets of flesh and skull shards out in a fine cloud behind it. Then the other one dropped him to his knees. The strength in its limbs was incredible.

Nahren was before him then, charging forwards, his face twisted in hatred. His crozius was almost as tall as him, and he drew it back in a powerful, swinging blow. There was a sharp crack of discharging energy as the spiked head of the holy weapon connected, and the creature was hurled away. Nahren offered a hand, helping Enusat to his feet. The foe that Enusat had gunned down was rising to its feet once more, despite missing half its head. Sickly brain matter, porridge-like and foetid, was dripping down its side. Where half its head should have been there was a ghostly monotone afterimage, showing the Word Bearers face as it had appeared in life, untouched by disease or decomposition. This spectral ghost-image was transparent, and it fixed Enusat with a look of pure hatred.

One of the Bloodsworn leaped upon it, tackling it to the ground. The possessed Word Bearers huge, crab-like claw encircled the creatures neck, shearing its head from its shoulders, leaving just the transparent face of an apparition in its place. Still, it was not slowed.

It rolled atop the possessed Bloodsworn warrior, and brought its fists together on either side of his head, once, twice, crushing his helmet. The daemonic entity that had inhabited the warrior departed instantly, returning his body to its previous, unaltered and now very dead state.

He heard Nargalaxs booming laughter hor hor hor and threw a sideways glance towards the Death Guard legionary. Was this his doing? It seemed not; the bloated warrior ripped apart one of their corrupt attackers with a controlled burst from his twin-barrelled combi-bolter, laughing as it was sent dancing away from him under the weight of his fire. He wielded the weapon one-handed, the weapon steadied by his bulbous tentacle. In his other hand he held his short, thick-bladed sword. Its edge was heavily notched and chipped, and noxious slime dripped from its tip.

Another of the Bloodsworn was down, dragged to the ground by three of the corrupted Word Bearers. The other Bloodsworn were laying about them with talon and claw, dismembering and hacking into dead flesh, but their enemies would not stay down. On they came, ghostly power-armoured limbs replacing those that had been ripped away. One of them was more spirit than flesh, now, but still it refused to fall. It could, however, still kill.

One of the apparitions thrust an incorporeal hand into the side of the head of one

of the Bloodsworn, fingertips pushing through skin and bone as if it were not there. The Bloodsworn felt its touch, though, that much was plain. Blood welled in the warriors eyes and ran from his nose, and he fell to the ground, twitching and jerking violently.

We have to go! shouted Enusat.

One of the unholy creatures came at him, clutching at his face, and he thrust the whirling chainblade slung beneath his autocannon into its chest. The whirring blades tore open its armour, which came apart like sodden wood, and ripped through its fused ribcage, splattering filth in all directions. Still the creature clung on. A squeeze of the trigger sent it flying.

Back! Back! roared Nahren, smashing another foe into the ground.

Enusat was walking backwards, swinging his heavy autocannon from one side to the other, pumping shots into the enemy. At the entrance to the bridge he halted, planting his feet in a wide brace position, providing covering fire for the Dark Apostle and the remaining Bloodsworn. Nargalax joined him there, his twin-barrelled combi-bolter coughing staccato bursts of fire.

At another barked order from the Dark Apostle, this time his voice tinged with a daemonic command, the Bloodsworn disengaged from the fight, blood and ichor dripping from their wounds, witch-fire flaring in their eyes.

One by one, the battered Word Bearers extricated themselves from the bridge, clambering back through the half-opened blast doors, until only Nargalax and Enusat remained. None of their ambushers now were whole. Most were lacking one limb or more, and many sported gaping holes and rents punched through their bodies large craters formed by Enusats autocannon, smaller detonations from bolters, and liquefied, gaping rents from melta and plasma weaponry. All exposed pellucid grey ghost-flesh and armour, showing the Word Bearers as they were in their prime. There were more than a dozen of them, all told, and they closed in without hurry, walking forwards slowly.

You go, said Enusat, urging the Death Guard to make his exit.

We'll go together, said Nargalax, snapping off another burst of fire, detonating another assailants head.

The enemy were closer now, and Enusat depressed his thumb-trigger, letting loose a salvo of fire on full auto. He swung the barrel of his weapon in a wide, sweeping arc, pumping shot after shot into the implacable advance, and empty shell casings tumbled around him, tinkling like so many tiny bells. Muzzle-flare lit up the room like an orange-tinged strobe. The sound was deafening, even through the aural dampeners of his helmet.

In the corner of his eye, Enusat saw a rapidly decreasing number clicking down as he tore through his ammunition store. It was accompanied by a small icon, a bar that was rapidly filling as his weapons temperature began to soar, even as the barrel began to glow red-hot.

The weight of his fire, combined with Nargalax's and that of the Bloodsworn, who were snapping off shots from outside the bridge, ripped through the enemy, jerking them backwards and half-spinning others as shots clipped them. But the shots had no effect on their spectral forms, the storm of gunfire passing through them without effect.

The legs of one of the corrupted Word Bearers were cut out beneath him by a surging melta-blast, and the creature fell to the ground. With a jerk, the spirit pulled free of the now legless flesh body, leaving it completely behind, and commenced its advance.

With a last torrent of fire, Enusat barked Now! and the Word Bearer and the Death Guard as one put up their smoking weapons and stepped back through the half-open blast doors, covered by the fire of the Bloodsworn.

They backed away, still snapping off shots. The enemy stopped at the edge of the bridge, staring after them. They did not attempt to pursue them. Perhaps they were unable to cross that boundary, for whatever reason, Enusat thought.

In their centre was the warrior that had torn fully loose from his fleshy body. A fan of blades framed his bald head, rendered in monochrome tones of grey. His hands were at his sides. He stared after them. His face was devoid of emotion, but his eyes seemed to hold an accusation. You left us here, they seemed to say.

That was Dol Vaedel, said Nahren. Coryphaus of the Third Host.

As one, the dead Word Bearers spoke.

The blightwood grows, they croaked.

Daalakath mel caengraal.

Let us leave this place, said Nahren, bitterly. There is nothing here for us. The Third Host is dead.

Whenever Marduk tried to focus on her features, they became blurred and smudged, making them impossible to discern. It was as if they were hidden by a psychic shroud. Indeed, even to try made Marduks eyes hurt. If he looked at her sideways, focusing past her, he could see that she had normal, unremarkable human features, but whenever his gaze drifted back to her face, it became once more an obscured blur.

What is this abomination? breathed Sabtec. There was a tremor in his voice.

She is an augur, and she is marvellous, said Marduk. Her name is Antigane.

How do you know the

childs... name, my lord? asked Sabtec.

She is telling me, said Marduk, a smile lighting his features. She is a child in body only, this one. The souls of other augurs and skalds dwell within her. So many! Seers, witches, mystics, crones. The line is strong and pure. Before her was one named

Chattor? No, Chattox, Marduk corrected. She was slain by bolt and fire by the gene-kin of the Imperial Fists, though they wore black, not yellow.

Templars, said Sabtec. The bastard get of Dorn.

Templars, yes, agreed Marduk. I can see them. She is showing me her deaths. Before Chattox was Demedike, and before her was Arabis of Davin. Do I understand that right?

Marduk laughed softly in wonder.

Davin? said Sabtec.

Oh yes, said Marduk. She is of the true blood.

I have been waiting for you, she pulsed.

Nargalax stopped in his tracks, forcing Enusat to halt so that he didnt bump into him.

No! said the Death Guard captain. She is mine!

What is wrong? said Enusat.

Treachery, said the Death Guard captain, still staring straight ahead. All of his humour had evaporated, like a lake under a rising sun, and his right hand reached towards the hilt of his corroded blade. She belongs to me!

Of what do you speak? said Enusat. Whose treachery?

Nahren and the two of his Bloodsworn that remained had become aware that something was taking place now, and were turning back. Sensing something amiss, they began to fan out around the lone Death Guard. The Bloodsworns weapons were not raised not yet but Enusat could feel their tension.

What is this? growled Nahren, turning and stamping back over the uneven ground.

I did not lie, said Nargalax. This vessel was as it is now when we found it.

I believe you, Nargalax, said Enusat. But what is this treachery you speak of?

The Death Guard captain turned his head towards Enusat.

You seek to take that which is not yours to claim, he said. His blue eye was not smiling now. All that was there was a cold, burning anger. Fools. You have damned yourselves with your greed and lust for power.

I like not your tone, Death Guard, said Nahren. You are the ones that took something that did not belong to you this ship.

I did not lie, Nargalax said again. Your precious Host was gone by the time I found this ship, claimed by the Garden. The Plague Fathers strength waxes

strong... His borders expand. I was enacting my duty. A world beyond the veil has been chosen. I will send this ship into this world, furthering the spread of Grandfather Nurgles domain. I bore you no ill will, nor those whom the Garden has already claimed. But now you will join them.

The Garden

of Nurgle? asked Nahren. You speak of it as a sentient thing.

And so it is, said Nargalax. For all your books and chanting... you know nothing, little man.

There has been no treachery, said Enusat. You are mistaken.

I am not, said Nargalax. The treachery... is being enacted even now.

Marduk, snarled Nahren. What has the fool done?

Killed you all, said Nargalax, and everything changed.

There had been a disconcerting lurch, something akin to the dislocation felt during warp transit. A wave of nausea crashed over Enusat, and he felt his gorge rise, acid burning the back of his throat. Then it was past, and the First Acolyte saw that they were no longer standing within the hold of a ship.

What in the names of the gods? he said, staring around him.

They were in the depths of a rotting jungle a true jungle. Twisted boughs of decaying trees, of a size and design that defied rationality, curled around each other overhead, forming a nigh impenetrable canopy, hanging with an overabundance of lichen, vines and fungus. In the few gaps in that impossible canopy, sulphuric yellow skies could be glimpsed.

The air was thick with flies, many bloated to gigantic proportions, and the ground was deep in rotting mulch, worms and crawling insects. A foetid river filled with drowned corpses could be glimpsed through the undergrowth, and doleful bells tolled in the distance, as if summoning the devout to a requiem mass.

A spray of blood splattered across Enusats faceplate, blurring his vision as

combi-bolter fire took one of the Bloodsworn in the side of the head. He went down, the bolter in his now dead hands firing wildly. Enusat grunted as a bolt ricocheted off his chestplate and detonated in beneath his left pauldron. Warning icons indicating the extent of the damage to his armour and body flashed before his eyes, but he blinked them away angrily.

Nahren turned, bringing his heavy crozius around in a lethal two-handed arc, but Nargalax met the blow with his left arm. It would have had as much effect had the Dark Apostle struck stone the weapon was stopped dead.

Nargalax's tentacle curled around the haft of Nahren's holy weapon, trapping it. The Death Guard pulled the Dark Apostle in close with a violent jerk, and rammed his wide-bladed sword into the Dark Apostles side.

No! roared Enusat, levelling his autocannon on the pair of combatants. He did not fire, however, as Nargalax had turned Nahren, shielding himself from the First Acolyte. Enusat could see the tip of the powered blade protruding from Nahren's lower back. It dripped with noxious poisons.

Nargalax twisted the blade, and Nahren hissed in pain, still fighting for control over his crozius. The last remaining sworn brother of the Bloodsworn was circling left, his plasma gun raised to his shoulder.

You brought this on yourself, Word Bearers, Nargalax said in a loud voice, his blue eye burning coldly. You seek to take that which was not yours. And now you will never leave the Garden.

The Dark Apostle spat in his face. The acidic saliva dripped down the Death Guards face, and steam rose from the welts it formed in its passage. The Dark Apostle released the grip of his right hand from the haft of his crozius, and in the blink of an eye he had his bolt pistol drawn. He pressed the barrel up underneath the foetid rolls of Nargalax's chin.

You are not walking away from here, Death Guard, said Nahren.

You are right, Word Bearer, said the Death Guard captain with a gargling laugh. I am not.

Nahren squeezed the trigger of his bolt pistol, firing up into the Death Guards rotten brainpan.

The bolt should have blown the Death Guard captain's skull to fragments, but even as the shot was fired, Nargalax's body was transformed into a million crawling, writhing bugs, worms and beetles. They held the shape of the Death Guard captain for the briefest of moments before they collapsed to the forest floor, a seething pile of foulness that dissipated into the undergrowth and was gone.

Nahren slumped to his knees, clutching at his stomach.

Damn, said Enusat.

Something scratched at the back of Kol Badar's mind, and his eyes narrowed as he sought its source. There was something very wrong here.

Coryphaus! came a warning shout, and he turned to see a vast pile of foulness made up of millions of worms, beetles, bugs and roaches resolving into the shape of a heavy-set, plate-armoured warrior. Nargalax. Blood dripped from the tip of his plague sword. Word Bearers' blood.

Take them! he bellowed.

He claimed the first kill, a bolt from his combi-bolter detonating one of the corrupted Guardsmen's heads. Other mortals were ripped apart as the Word Bearers unleashed their firepower on the move, heading for cover, but the enemy were firing now too.

Eschewing any form of cover, the Death Guard planted their feet and began pumping shots at the Word Bearers. Three shots pummeled one warrior-brother backwards, cratering his chestplate, before a fourth took him in the throat. Another dropped to the ground, a stray shot taking him in the side of his knee and almost tearing his leg off. Returning fire, the Word Bearer struck one of the Death Guard, blowing chunks from his chest, but the legionary hardly even rocked backwards, and his return fire dropped another Word Bearer. Truly these were Mortarions' sons.

Another warrior-brother was cut down by Nargalax, his corroded power blade hacking from collar bone to sternum. The wound festered in seconds, turning rotten and foul, and the Word Bearer died with a scream on his lips.

Kol Badar moved towards the Death Guard captain, determined to avenge his

brethren. A bolt struck him in the left shoulder, and he growled, more in irritation than pain. He snapped off a burst of shots, killing two of the gasmask-wearing mortals.

He saw two of his Word Bearers round on a single Death Guard warrior, flanking him. They pounded him with bolt-rounds, but he took it all, even as gobbets of flesh and chunks of his armour were blown from his body. The legionary killed the first of the Word Bearers, pumping him with shells, then turned on the second. The Word Bearer ducked into cover to reload, and the Death Guard walked steadily after him, sliding a fresh drum of ammunition into his own bolter.

Kol Badar ripped the Plague Marines head off, and at last it slumped to the ground, liquefying as it did so. He snarled in frustration as he saw that he'd lost sight of Nargalax.

He heard a mechanical roar, and glanced across the embarkation deck to see one of his warriors pinned against a wall by his throat, held aloft by the three-metre tall abhuman. The roar he heard was the immense rock-drill that had replaced the creature's right arm, and it turned to a screaming whine as it was thrust up into the Word Bearers body, shearing through armour, bone and flesh with frenzied ease, as well as drilling half a metre into the adamantium wall behind him.

A targeting matrix locked on to the abhuman, and Kol Badar let the Death Guards severed head slip from his talons. Snarling, he strode towards the towering ogryn brute, unleashing a torrent of fire as he went.

His bolts embedded themselves no more than a centimetre into the hulking abhumans flesh before they detonated, spraying plenty of blood but doing only circumstantial damage. Armour plates had been inserted into its body, the Coryphaeus realised.

The wounds got the brutes attention, however, and it swung towards him, the thick, ribbed pipe of its mask swinging around like a grotesque proboscis. Kol Badar stalked directly towards it, still firing, ignoring the bolt-rounds that streaked by him. He unloaded a full clip into the huge abhuman, halving his rate of fire. The idiot creature swatted at his shells as if they were flies, its roars of pain and rage muffled by the thick black rubber mask it wore strapped over its head. Its beady eyes stared out through green-tinged glass goggles, and he saw

them narrow to points, realising at last the source of its pain.

With a muffled roar, it broke into a lumbering run towards him, its drill-arm spinning. It lowered its shoulder, intending to slam him off his feet. That suited him just fine.

Using all the power in his gene-enhanced frame, augmented by the strength of the servo-muscles and fibre-bundles of his armour, he struck the charging brute a backhanded blow with his power-taloned fist, sending it crashing to the ground. Its momentum gouged a deep furrow through the deck before it came to rest against a bulkhead, which crumpled inwards against its weight.

Kol Badar closed in, stamping after it. It tried to rise, staggered and fell again. Its gasmask had been half ripped away and hung limp from one side, and its brutish jaw was hanging loose, broken in a dozen places. Its maw was a repulsive, toothless cavity, and it had no nose to speak of, just a pair of slits from which protruded a cluster of mucus-slick cables and pipes. Its eyes were wet and dribbling.

It tried to rise again, this time succeeding, but Kol Badar was on it then, clamping his power talons around its neck. With a savage yank he tore out its throat. The creature tried to bellow, but nothing came from its mouth but a splatter of blood. It stubbornly refused to fall, though; too inured to pain or too stupid to realise that it was already dead.

It rammed its rock-drill into Kol Badar's thigh, whirring madly. His ornate Terminator armour resisted for a moment, then gave way, and the rotating drill ripped through fibre-bundles and flesh, tearing at muscles and churning through bone.

Closing his talons around the abhumans mechanised arm, Kol Badar forcibly withdrew the drill from his leg, and dark blood gushed from the wound. He fired his combi-bolter into the beast's face, pounding its adamantium-like skull, blinding it and pulping the flesh there; but still it fought on.

Balling its massive hand—a hand that could enclose a mortal man's body in its grasp—into a giant fist, the brute struck Kol Badar in the side of his helmet. The blow dented his helm and snapped two of its tusks, and he reeled back a step, staggering. It was like being hit by a solid artillery shell.

It was on its knees now. Kol Badar mag-locked his combi-bolter to his thigh and limped forwards. He grasped the huge monster's head in his hands and gave a brutal twist, eliciting a sickening crack, and it slumped, finally, to the ground.

Calmly, ignoring the pain of his leg and the gunfire spattering around him, Kol Badar reloaded his combi-bolter.

Marduks voice came to him then, crackling through the vox-network.

I have what I came for, he said. It is time to leave.

Nahren is still within the ship, said Kol Badar.

Leave him, came the crackling reply. He is of no consequence.

Enusat is with him.

This time there was a delay before Marduk answered.

How far away are they?

I dont know weve had no contact with them.

Go, said Marduk. His is a noble sacrifice. He will be remembered.

Kol Badar was about to argue, but the battle was faring poorly. It had only been under way for minutes, but bodies were strewn across the deck floor. Their spilled blood had attracted the attention of flying insects, which were busy feeding and laying eggs in ravaged flesh. Six of his Word Bearers were already down, as opposed to only two of the Death Guard. The number of human mortals was inconsequential.

Word Bearers, he roared. We are leaving!

Thousands of rotting, flyblown heads hung by their hair from the lower branches above them, like so much rotting fruit. They looked down upon these new arrivals, eyes dripping with mucus and pus, and their mouths gaped open.

The blightwood grows, they said, as one.

Daalakath mel caengraal.

Already, foetid vines and crawling ropes of roots and stranglethorns had grown over the body of the fallen Bloodsworn. Tiny mushrooms burst from the flesh of his face, and insects and maggots already filled his mouth and eyes. Within moments, he was subsumed into the undergrowth, feeding the decay.

Enusat moved to the Dark Apostles side, and helped him to his feet.

Ill be fine, Nahren said.

Something grotesque fell from on high suddenly, crashing down through rotten branches to fall before Enusat, Nahren and the last of the Bloodsworn. It was a foul, membranous birth sac, and it hit the ground with a wet thump. Something squirmed and writhed within. Enusat lowered his autocannon, but Nahren pushed the barrel of his weapon aside.

No, said the Dark Apostle. It would not to do raise the ire of the Plague Father, not here in His realm.

Did the tainted one speak the truth, then? he replied. Are we truly within the Garden of Nurgle?

Look around you, said Nahren. We stand in the presence of greatness.

A single, curving horn pierced the birth sac flopping around before them, and amniotic fluid, blood and mucus spilled out in a flood. A swarm of insects flocked to the disgusting feast, but Enusats eyes were locked on the creature rising before them.

The single horn rose from its forehead, and it clawed its way free of the clinging membrane, its spindly limbs slick with birth fluids. It was a gangrel creature. If it stood straight, it would be fully two heads taller than any of the Word Bearers, yet its back was twisted and stooped, its spine clearly visible, protruding through its drowned-man flesh. It had the bloated stomach of a plague victim and the open sores of the diseased. A single great cyclopean eye blinked in its head, filled with cataracts and oozing styes, and its chest heaved as it took in its first, heaving breath.

It saw them, and blinked. Its fleshy, worm-like lips parted, exposing rotten tusks and gravestone teeth, and worms writhed in its throat.

Onetwothreefourfivesixseven, it groaned. It took a lumbering step towards them, legs wobbling like jelly. Onetwothreefourfivesixseven, seven, seven, seven.

It took another step, this one more stable as it got used to the notion of walking. It lifted a hand towards them. Its nails were incrustated with filth.

A second birth sac thudded to the ground behind them, and a third fell nearby. Others crashed through the branches, bringing with them a tumble of rotting leaves and maggots.

I think it best we leave this place, said Enusat.

I am not certain that is going to be a simple task, said Nahren.

Too late, Kol Badar noticed the worms and millipedes writhing underfoot. Too late he realised that something was taking shape behind him. He turned with a snarl, talons lashing out, but he could not stop the sword thrust in time.

Nargalax's blade took him in the shoulder, the jagged, evil weapon grinding against bone as it spitted him. His flesh burned as toxins and poisons entered his system.

She's mine, said Nargalax. You have no right.

He twisted the blade, made Kol Badar hiss.

This will kill you... you know, said the Death Guard, almost as an afterthought. But it will not be a fast death.

Kol Badar's vision wavered. There were shouts, and bolts whickered by him to strike Nargalax, but the Coryphaeus hardly registered the cries, and the Death Guard captain merely laughed as he retracted his blade. The Coryphaeus was half dragged aboard the Invisus, which was adding its own supporting fire, and the shuttle's assault ramp slammed shut. Still the Death Guard's laugh could be heard.

Hor hor hor.

Marduk was waiting for them as they disembarked, bloodied and battered.

Kol Badar's face was wan and slick with sweat, and he leaned on Sabtec as he

hobbled onto the deck.

A child with no face stood by Marduk, and Kol Badar glanced down at her, struggling to focus.

I hope it was worth it, he said between clenched teeth.

Oh, it most certainly was, said Marduk.

Then the klaxons began to sound, and the smile dropped from Marduks face.

Goodbye, said Nargalax.

The Death Guard stood on the deck of the Vox Dominus, surrounded by fecund growth and the last remnants of his warband. His blue eye was cold with hatred as he stared out at the Infidus Diabolus in the distance.

He did not blink as the roiling anomaly dragged the Word Bearers ship through its surging portal, nor when it snapped shut behind them.

It was done.

Enusat supported the weight of the Dark Apostle. The lone Bloodsworn remaining of Nahrens entourage ranged out in front, scouting the way. They had been travelling for what weeks? Months? It was impossible to gauge. The unfathomable jungle spread out before them, immense and immeasurable, and on they tracked.

They had seen such sights as to make Enusat weep in despair and wonder. But none of that mattered now.

Nahrens wound would not close, and while they patched it frequently with the crude poultices they made, held in place with mud and leaves, it was foetid and stinking with foulness whenever Enusat inspected it. The Dark Apostles skin was waxy and grey, and his veins were black and throbbing.

They saw ships hanging low in orbit from time to time, inert and apparently lifeless. There were dozens of them, of all sizes and shapes. Some Enusat recognised as battleships and cruisers of human design, while others were strange and unnatural xenos vessels. In places they were so low that the canopy

had enveloped them. They looked like ancient ruins, suspended above the noxious plague world, encrusted with filth and hanging with coiling vines. Spindly branches, like reaching skeletal hands, clutched towards those ships that had not yet been claimed.

Some time earlier they had seen a pair of smaller vessels hauling one of the hulks away, dragging it free of the clinging trees and twisting sky-roots. They had not tarried to watch for long, however. A spawn-cluster of tiny, bulbous daemons had burst from an overgrown pitcher plant nearby, spilling out upon the jungle floor, giggling and gnashing their teeth. In a tumble, they had waddled and rolled towards the Word Bearers. While they were hardly threatening, they were attracting larger beings, things as large as mountains that crushed the jungle beneath their bulk, and so they had hurriedly moved on.

Looking up now through a gap in the canopy, Enusat saw a new ship arrive, blinking into existence. The poor fools, he thought. Do they yet understand their fate?

For a moment, he thought that the ship might be the Infidus Diabolus, but then it was obscured once more as the writhing canopy closed over.

What

is it? said Nahren, his voice weak.

Enusat shook his head. He must have been mistaken.

It is nothing, he said, and they continued trudging deeper into the Garden of Nurgle.