

# A Traitor's Trust

By Dirk Wehner

A fleet of ships was slowly drifting in the darkness beyond the Scourge Stars. Strange nebula hung between the infamous systems, almost like billowing clouds or unfathomable masses of putrid spores. Imperial warships that had once plied the void, and Imperial satellites that had ghosted through the cold darkness, were now reduced to rusted hulks and drifting wreckages, tainted by the stuff of the warp and ravaged by the hostile attentions of the Plague God's worshippers. The very stuff of realspace seethed with the touch of Grandfather Nurgle, for the followers of that foul deity had prevailed utterly throughout this region of space; none but they could hope to survive for long within the aegis of these utterly tainted worlds.

The fleet navigated carefully. They did not flee in horror from the rampant malignancy as Imperial shipmasters might have. They were manned by servants of Chaos themselves – a mixed force of renegades, heretics and lowly pirates – all united under a common cause by one being.

Aboard the *Wretch* – the sinister flagship of the fleet – that very being pondered over his prize. Amidst a dimly lit laboratory, held by a stasis field that had been strengthened through unholy ritual, the casket hung in mid-air while he slowly walked around it, watching, thinking. A heavy coat sewn from human skin hid the bulk of his power armour. A contorted mass of servo-arms protruded from his back, studded with syringes, saw blades and barbarous torture devices, which he himself considered scientific tools.

Fabius Bile stopped in his tracks and smiled.

*The Ark Cornucontagious.*

*Finally, it is mine.*

He took a step closer to the stasis field in order to examine the thing. It didn't look very impressive, almost unimposing. A simple chest, fashioned from warped wood turned nearly black by rot, its brass fixtures crusted with verdigris that could not quite hide the mark of Nurgle worked repeatedly into its fabric. But the power it held... the things he could do if he unlocked the eldritch forces within...



The stasis field flickered and, ever so slowly, a pus-filled blister formed on the suspended casket. Fabius' grin broadened a little. What he saw was impossible by all means, and yet the Ark Cornucontagious struggled against its constraints, too powerful to be held by such ancient and delicate technology. Too powerful even for the dark forces that Fabius' sorcerer-servants had used to amplify the strength of the stasis field.

The thought of these two particular minions made him sneer even more. They had become such interesting specimens after they had performed the ritual. Under the influence of the relic, their flesh had grown at an abnormal rate, making them bloated, heaving bags of ruptured meat, as far from anything human conceivable.

On his endless search for the keys to life and death, Fabius Bile's path had crossed with the forces of Nurgle time and time again, but never had he witnessed such power. Once unleashed, the Ark Cornucontagious brought catastrophic mutations and uncontrollable growth at such an alarming rate that it could easily corrupt entire planets within a matter of cycles.

Still grinning, Fabius took another step towards the stasis field, unconsciously rubbing his hands together. Yes, he could hardly wait to unlock all the secrets of this relic, to harness its full potential for his own means, to use its power...

*If it weren't for those... inconveniences...*

Fabius' smile vanished as the thought crossed his mind.

The Ark Cornucontagious didn't belong to him in the strictest sense, and the Death Guard weren't too happy about the way he had obtained it from them. The fools thought of it as holy, a gift from the Rainfather himself, and they had been adamant in their ambition to get it back.

Since Bile and his forces had stolen it from them, the Death Guard had been doggedly pursuing his fleet, picking off ship after ship of the renegades. At last it seemed that Fabius' ragtag fleet had shaken off its pursuers. It had been days since they had seen one of the bloated Death Guard ships, but Fabius was sure that they'd show up again soon.

Without a sound, the blister on the Ark Cornucontagious popped, spraying pus through the stasis field. The disgusting droplets were immediately suspended mid-air, and hung there like revolting little stars.

'Intriguing,' Fabius mumbled, leaning closer.

Suddenly, a dissonant alarm blared and the laboratory was bathed in red light. Fabius grimaced with annoyance and straightened himself. He had to deal with this matter once and for all, or he would never find the time for his work. With swift steps, his coat billowing behind him, he made for the bridge of the *Wretch*.

Behind him, the Ark Cornucontagious slowly formed another blister on its pockmarked surface.

+++

'I want to speak to Bile *now*,' Grarken Furith growled. 'Hail the *Wretch* again!'

The rusty bridge of the *Eagleflenser* was a cacophony of screaming alarms, misshapen servitors jabbering in a continuous flow of binharic datastreams and heretic crew members rushing to man their battle stations. Grarken glared from his command chair at the mess that surrounded him. His massive black power armour whined in protest as he sprang to his feet.

'And get some order into this madness, or I swear by the Dark Gods I'll—'

'You wished to speak with me, Lord Furith,' Fabius Bile's voice suddenly chimed in from the vox. It was slightly distorted, but Grarken could still hear how calm and smug the Primogenitor sounded. The Renegade Captain's anger rose.

'Are you aware that the Death Guard just emerged from the warp right at our heels?' he screamed. 'They outnumber us by far! We are doomed and it's your damned fault!'

'Calm down, Lord Furith,' Bile said softly, and thus provoked the opposite. 'I did promise you command of a mighty fleet if you served me well, no? And here you are, master of ten vessels. I also promised that we would obtain the relic, and we did.'

'I don't care about your relic, Bile!' Grarken shouted, while violently pushing away a lowly servant that begged for his attention. 'All I want to know is how you will get us out of here! I did not forfeit my Chapter just to die out here on your foolish whims. I swear to you, if this is our end, I will personally tear you apart.'

Bile paused for a moment. 'You have to trust me one last time,' he said. 'I promise that I will get out of this alive and well.'

Grarken nodded, shoving aside the tenacious serf again. 'That's what I wanted to... wait, what did you just say?'

'My lord,' the servant croaked, crawling on his knees and fumbling weakly at Grarken's spike-studded greave. 'The *Wretch* has powered up its engines and makes for the Mandeville Point.'

'The Death Guard fleet is engaging our rear guard!' another bridge servant called in a panicked voice. 'They have crippled the *Fires of Dread*! They are boarding her!'

Grarken Furith felt a wave of anger rising, sweeping away everything but a burning desire to lay his hands around Fabius Bile's neck and strangle that malicious, sneering traitor.

'Ignore the Death Guard!' he shouted. 'All ships, full power to the plasma drives! Pursue the *Wretch*! I want Fabius Bile wiped from existence, if it's the last thing I ever do!'

The deck under his feet shuddered as his command was followed and all energy was diverted to the *Eagleflenser's* plasma drive. A sinister smile split the face of the Renegade Captain. He would get Bile, and when he did...

A sudden lunge made him almost lose his balance and new alarms started blaring. For a moment, the bridge was dark, only lit by flying sparks from overcharged command consoles before the emergency lumen sprang to life.

'My lord, there's been a catastrophic malfunction in the plasma engines!' a panicked serf shouted. 'The *Mutilatus*, the *Darkfist*, the *Lord of Hatred* - all ships report plasma drive failures, my lord! The whole fleet is dead in the void!'

Amidst the pandemonium, the bridge vox crackled to life and Bile's voice slithered forth one last time. His words became ever more distorted as the

distance to the *Wretch* grew, but his contempt was all too obvious.

'To be completely honest, Lord Furith, I never trusted you. And neither should you have trusted me. Please send my regards to the Death Guard. I bid you farewell.'

All colour drained from Grarken's face. A scream built in his throat, a hateful shriek, as the *Eagleflenser's* bridge began to tremble under the impacts of the Death Guard's weaponry. In the last moments of his life, before his ship exploded around him, Grarken Furith shouted a single name.

+++

'Bile,' Typhus growled. 'I don't care about his fleet of lowlife scum, I only want Bile.'

Fluggogh Mogh took a measured step backwards before he answered. Clouds of plague flies buzzed up from the Tallyman's armour in agitation. For now, Typhus seemed more or less calm as he sat in the command throne of the *Terminus Est*, but still, he did not want to raise his lord's ire.

'As I said,' Fluggogh repeated, his voice a wet rasp. 'The Primogenitor's fleet was fully destroyed, but he has escaped aboard his own ship.' He made another step backwards. 'With the relic I'm afraid, my master.'

Typhus shifted under the weight of his Terminator armour, scowling at the Tallyman as though he personally was responsible.

'That is... unfortunate,' he snarled.

'But there is good news as well,' Fluggogh added, quickly. 'Our creatures... the Daemons have scented the psychic trail of the Ark Cornucontagious. We don't know his plans, but we finally know where Bile is headed.'

'Tell me,' Typhus demanded.

'The *Wretch* is on course to the Cadian Gate, my master,' Fluggogh said.

Typhus snorted. 'Then we'll meet him there, and we'll have a conversation about the meaning of ownership.'

The *Terminus Est's* engines powered up, and the enormous battleship slowly set into motion. Behind it, a Plague Fleet consisting of dozens of blighted ships followed, leaving a trail of putrid vapours that soon frayed out into nothing in the emptiness of space.

