



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

FABIUS BILE  
**PRODIGAL**

JOSH REYNOLDS



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# PRODIGAL

*Josh Reynolds*

Fabius Bile hummed with quiet satisfaction and studied the tiny shapes floating in the half-dozen man-sized nutrient tanks. The children were scrawny things, culled from the lower hives of three worlds, but there was a fierce potential in them, which stirred his somnolent creativity. It had been some time, and he was glad to find that the fires of ingenuity had not been utterly snuffed, as he sometimes feared.

The systems of the laboratorium flickered as *Vesalius* slipped into the obscuring depths of warpspace. The ancient Gladius-class frigate was his personal vessel, claimed in some long-ago raid on a forgotten world. Its former name had been stripped from it, as had every trace of its previous owners. Now and forever, it was simply *Vesalius*. Whatever cruel spirit now haunted its core seemed happy enough with the name. Which was just as well. Bile was not in the habit of letting his tools dictate their own designations, however useful they might be. ‘That is the responsibility of the creator,’ he said, as he thumped a flickering hololith projector. ‘To name a thing is to lay out its purpose.’ He looked around, ensuring all was in its proper place.

Magnetised trays of surgical equipment, much of it designed by Bile himself, occupied the walls, alongside diverse charts, documenting his ongoing experiments and various observations. Enhanced pict-captures of in-progress dissections jostled for space with chemical readouts and scraps of poetry, culled from worlds without number. Beauty drawn from amidst the wreckage. Poetry, like music, was a passion of his. A holdover from ancient days and associations, comforting in its familiarity.

The laboratorium was his private fiefdom aboard the vessel, the one place where he could be alone, free from the squabbling factionalism of his servants. It

was his own fault, for fostering a climate of healthy competition among the crew, necessary though it might be. Only the strongest survived in this galaxy.

‘And you will be strong, my children. It is writ in your very blood.’ He studied his reflection in the void-hardened glass of the tanks. A thin face looked back, sallow and marked by scar tissue and minor inflammation around the nodal insertion points that dotted his skull. Metallic arachnid limbs, topped by blades, saws and glistening syringes, rose over his hunched frame, twitching in time to some faint modulation. The skull-topped sceptre he leaned on glowed faintly with an unnatural radiance. Power thrummed through it, sinister and greedy. It yearned to be used. An amplifier, its slightest touch could elicit a raging torrent of agony in even the strongest subject. Hence its name – Torment.

Even clad in power armour, Bile was gaunt, like a parasite hunched inside the hollowed-out body of its victim. The deep purple of the ceramite had faded to a dull hue, and bare patches of grey showed through in places where it was not hidden beneath his coat of stretched, screaming faces. Like the ostentatious name of his sceptre, the coat was a sign of an instinctual theatrical indulgence. Such monstrous whimsy was hardwired into the genetics of the Third Legion, as much a part of them as their hair colour and pallor.

‘It cannot be helped, I suppose. Blood will out.’ He activated his armour’s vox-recorder. It was an old habit, and one he saw no reason to break. Even the most mundane of his musings were of value, he’d found. Idle fancies on the nature of progenoid cultivation could be traded to lesser Apothecaries for substantial gains, in raw materials or even necessary technologies. His researches were responsible for the survival of more than one Legion lurking in Eyespace, whether they’d admit it or not. And most wouldn’t.

His name was a curse among his brothers. They had their reasons. No man loves the surgeon who removes his limb, gangrenous or not. Fortunately, Bile did not require love. He required isolation and respect, two things he had in abundance. For the moment, at least. He traded his skills as an Apothecary for protection, for resources, for whatever he needed. He bore no grudges from his previous life, no old hostilities. The Legion Wars were done, and whatever martial ambitions he might once have harboured with them.

‘All things end. That is the nature of this universe. All of us are destined to be ash, scattered across sand. All save you. And those who will come after.’ Bile peered into the nutrient-tanks, taking note of the changes already being wrought in those youthful physiologies. He had perfected the implantation of certain organs and glands, necessary to the extension and expansion of human potential.

While these children would not become the ideal, as exemplified by a Space Marine, they would be more than human. And, best of all, completely stable. They would be stronger, faster, more aggressive than the standard template. More suited for survival in this harsh universe.

‘We are deceptively fragile things, my brothers and I. We stand as citadels, our bastions replete with hidden flaws and weaknesses. At our height, we might have ruled. But now, we crumble, like all things must. But in our ruination is the seed of what might be.’

That was his work now. His great responsibility. To improve upon the flawed designs of those who’d come before, and seed the stars with a New Man – one adapted to the grim darkness of the current millennium. The children in the nutrient-tanks would be among the first generation of that new species. The alterations he was making to them would be passed along, down through their progeny, to future generations. They were the foundation stones of his new race, chosen for viability and adaptability.

‘And you will thank me,’ he said. ‘You will know me, and venerate my works, for I shall not abandon you, as my father abandoned me, and his father, him. Wherever you go, whatever your triumphs, I shall be at your side, one hand upon your shoulders. For am I not your progenitor? Did I not pluck you from obscurity, to raise you chosen up, as I have your brothers and sisters?’

*Vesalius*’ hold was full of cryogenic sarcophagi, of his own design, each one containing a sleeping body. Children mostly, some older, some younger. The Flesh-Tithe, his servants called it. He had worked miracles upon many worlds, and those worlds repaid him in raw materials. The firstborn sons and daughters of noble houses slumbered beside orphans taken from industrial factory-worlds, or feral children who had once roamed the underhives of a dozen worlds. Some came willingly, aware of the honour of being selected. Others had to be rounded up by his servants on those worlds.

Over the centuries, he had seeded innumerable worlds with his creations. Clones, transhumans, specially bred mutants – these saw to his will. They ruled in his name, or twisted planetary bureaucracies to suit his needs. Some served simply to ensure that planetary defence fleets patrolled a certain sector, on a certain cycle, or to hide evidence of his genetic harvest among their tithing to the bloodless inheritors of the legacies of the Legions of the First Founding. It would not do for the tottering husk of the Imperium to discover the full extent of his activities, and his creations worked to protect his secrets.

All were his children. In spirit, if not in biology.

‘As you are my children,’ he said, to the shapes slumbering in their nutrient-tanks. His smile of satisfaction faltered. Once, there had been another who might have claimed that distinction. A daughter of his flesh, drawn fully-grown from his womb-vats, and draped in damask and silk. Her face filled his mind’s eye for a moment, before he banished it. His first true creation, and possibly his last. Unique in all the galaxy, built from blood and possibility.

Wherever she was, she was no use to him now. He felt no anger at the thought. She had chosen her path, as he had created her to do. That her path had not been his had been a miscalculation on his part, rather than a mistake on hers. She existed, and that was enough. She lived and her living was a sign he was not mad, whatever others claimed.

Bile often pondered the matter of his sanity. While the distinction between reason and lunacy for veterans of the Long War was often so miniscule as to be meaningless, he nonetheless found himself considering it at odd moments. Perhaps it was because his mind was all he had. The flesh he wore was not his original flesh. This body was not his first, nor would it be his last. The blight, which clung to his genetic code even now, saw to that. But his mind... his mind was the aleph around which the entirety of his existence rotated. Without his mind, he was nothing.

Behind him, something chuckled.

He tensed, his grip on Torment tightening. Hololithic targeting overlays shimmered to life before his eyes, and the sensor feed of his armour crackled as it became active. His hand dropped to the Xyclos needler holstered on his hip. He had designed the weapon himself. He often had a need to test new chemical concoctions under battlefield conditions. Even the smallest scratch from one of the thin darts it fired could induce madness or death.

‘Show yourself,’ he said. Whatever it was likely wasn’t sapient in any true fashion. Even the ones that talked were just parroting mortal responses. He wondered what sort of being it was. Sometimes, things slipped past *Vesalius*’ Gellar field. The frigate was old, and its systems often worked in strange ways.

Too, the ship’s machine-spirit had a decidedly crude sense of humour. More than once, it had let a warp-entity aboard, only to trap the creature on one of the lower decks, and study it at length through its internal sensors. Sometimes, he suspected that *Vesalius* might have a thirst for knowledge rivalling his own. ‘Is this another of your pranks, *Vesalius*?’

A signal-rune flashed crimson. A lifetime living in the Eye of Terror had necessitated the devising of new sorts of sensors, ones that could detect

fluctuations in the very substance of reality. A slight ripple in his vitreous humour and a taste of ashes added to his growing sense of unease. The sterile air of the laboratory was tainted by something raw and damp. ‘*Vesalius* – initiate laboratory lockdown procedures Stanislaw-Omega.’

Air hissed as the locking mechanisms built into the laboratory’s single bulkhead sealed. Plasteel shutters slid down, further isolating the chamber. Whatever was in here wasn’t getting out until he said so. Bile drew his needler. ‘Now, the question you must ask yourself is this – why would I risk trapping myself in here with you?’

He turned slowly, letting his targeting systems do their job. The overlays expanded and contracted, cataloguing information, closing in on the source of disturbance. ‘Perhaps, it is because I lack fear. Especially of some warp-spawned scavenger.’

Another red rune flashed. He swung the needler around. Nothing. He ground rotting teeth in frustration. ‘Or maybe it’s confidence. I have faced the worst horrors of deep space and found them to be momentary diversions, at best.’

A laugh. Low and guttural. It reverberated through the chamber, rattling the specimen jars on their shelves. The children stirred in their tanks, as if beset by nightmares. Bile hissed in frustration. ‘Come out now, and perhaps I will kill you before I dissect you.’

More laughter. Bile grimaced. ‘Laugh if you wish, but know this – I have ways of maintaining the integrity of warp-spawn, however much they might wish otherwise. You might be nothing but a figment of delirium given solidity by a random confluence of interdimensional phenomena, but I will make you howl regardless.’ He levelled the needler, as his targeting overlay pinged. ‘Even figments can bleed.’

As he spoke, the warp-entity condensed out of empty air, a mass of teeth and tendrils. It had too many mouths and each one was speaking in a different language. It smashed aside equipment racks and cogitator banks in its rush to grapple with him. Bile didn’t move. He couldn’t risk it damaging his nutrient-tanks, or the precious specimens within. The Xyclos needler hissed, peppering rubbery flesh with silvery splinters.

The daemon shrieked and slammed sucker-laced tendrils down on him. The force of the blow drove him to one knee, and his armour’s internal monitoring systems shrieked a warning. Torment clattered from his grip, growling in frustration as it rolled away. The daemon flushed from pink to purple, and the cancerous mass at the heart of the lashing tendrils split open to disgorge an

oscillating maw of shimmering, diamond-like teeth. He had no doubt that those teeth could crack ceramite. Where the needler's splinters had pierced it, its sorcerously constructed flesh was going septic, but not quickly enough.

Tendrils looped about his arms and throat. With a thought, he activated the surgeon. He had designed the complex harness himself. It clung to his shoulders and spine with a strength that surprised even him, at times, and its spidery limbs often had a will of their own. At the moment, however, it seemed inclined to obey his commands. Syringes and cutting blades lanced out as a bone-drill whirred to life. The daemon squealed in what he hoped to be pain. It was hard to tell with such creatures.

Despite that, its tendrils still entangled him, and with crushing strength, pulled him closer to its oscillating maw. A sweet smell like rotten fruit washed over him as the surgeon continued its butchery. Hissing ichors splattered cogitator consoles and specimen jars. But the daemon refused to release him.

'Stubborn brute – as single-minded as all your kind.'

When he spotted the sigils branded on what passed for its flesh, he realised why. Someone had summoned this creature, and sent it after him. There was no way of telling how long it had been hunting him, waiting for its moment to strike. This was not the first time such a thing had occurred – his enemies were without number, and prone to excess.

He tore his arm free of its coils and groped for the largest of the sigils. Its flesh felt like rubber stretched across wet sand. He dug his fingers in, trusting the ancient servos within his gauntlet to give him the strength he required. Unnatural tissue tore with a wet sound. He peeled the mark away, and a coruscating smoke spewed from the wound.

The daemon shuddered, wailing from its many mouths. 'Felt that, did you?' Bile said. As it thrashed, he freed the needler and took aim at the emptiness beyond the spinning circle of teeth. He fired, emptying the needler's cylinder. Its tendrils whipped away from him as it slammed backwards into the bulkhead. Opalescent smoke gouted from between its fangs. It was screaming now, babbling in a hundred languages, begging for mercy, cursing him, swearing vengeance, every mouth shrieking something different.

He examined the twitching scrap of meat he'd harvested. He'd hoped the creature would disappear with the sigil's removal. Then, there might be other bindings. The scrap pulsed in his grip, as if it might persist separate from the whole. He deposited it in an empty specimen jar. The jars were marked with such symbols as would keep the sample fresh and stable. Wiping his fingers on his

coat, he retrieved Torment and stalked towards the weeping, shivering mass now slumped on the floor of the laboratorium. A rotting tendril slashed out at him, coming apart in fragrant chunks when he batted it aside with Torment. ‘Still some fight left in you. Good.’

At his thought, the chirurgion clicked eagerly. Its blades gleamed as it readied itself for the harvest. The pulsating mass squirmed back from him, losing parts of itself with every undulation. He’d been right after all. It was coming apart, thanks to the excision of the binding rune. Eyes like tumours opened in its body, and fixed him with a communal glare. He paused. There wasn’t anger there, or even frustration. No, it was... calculation? Glee?

Sensors shrilled a warning, as something caught him around the scalp and jerked him backwards. The daemon wasn’t alone. He crashed down amidst steel racks of fibre bundles and prosthetic limbs. Jars containing Catalepsean nodes, oculobes and Betcher’s glands toppled from their shelves and smashed to the floor around him. The waste of such valuable materials sent a thrill of anger through him, and he surged up with a snarl, Torment raised. A second creature, much like the first, spun towards him, barbed tendrils slashing.

Before it could reach him, something fell upon it with a feline snarl. Bile skidded to a halt, startled by the sudden intervention. A third daemon had pounced upon the second. This one was of a more highly developed breed, and his sensors began to analyse its shape, cataloguing it for further study. Daemons came in as many shapes as there were stars in the firmament, and no two were truly alike, despite what some sages contended. Even those with a stable manifestation often took on unique qualities, as if they were individuals rather than mere manifestations of a psychic gestalt.

The newcomer tore tendrils from the oval body of its prey, splattering the walls and floor with ichors. The daemon let loose a high-pitched shriek and cast its attacker aside. Before it could recover, Bile pinned it to the deck with a boot and brought Torment down with bone-cracking force. The inhuman shape spasmed, venting noxious gases. Torment throbbed in his grip as he struck the warp-entity again and again, until it was an unrecognizable heap.

The first daemon surged towards him, even as he stepped back. Its flesh sloughed away as it lunged, teeth snapping. He smashed it from the air and trod upon it, bursting a glaring eye. It shuddered and went still.

The newcomer rose to its full height with a sigh. ‘Hello, Fabius. I felt you thinking of me.’ The creature smiled prettily. Her features were almost human, almost lovely, but not quite. She wore a diaphanous robe, which did little to

obscure what lay beneath it. Horns of glossy black, veined with red, curled tightly against either side of her narrow skull. A thick mane of stiff, quill-like hair spilled down her back and shoulders. Clawed fingers, clad in gold, dripped with the ichors of the daemon she'd attacked. Eyes like red mirrors stared out of a face at once familiar and odd. A beautiful face, androgynous and strange. Once, long ago, he might have seen a similar face reflected back at him.

'Melusine,' he said, softly. Memories of a child, growing at an enhanced rate, filled his head unbidden. From foetus to adult in a few weeks. But human seeming, for all that he'd included other elements in her genetic makeup. At least then.

His first attempt at creating something of his own. The first child of his nutrient-vats, grown rather than altered. He had seen her only a few times since the day she'd left his apothecarium in Canticle City. 'You are much changed, since last we spoke, Melusine,' Bile said. 'Where have you been?'

'I have been dancing in the court of Slaanesh, and promenaded through the gardens of Nurgle. I have watched the fires of Khorne's forges burn the horizons, and traded bits of dreamstuff with the caged seers of Tzeentch.' She spun in a slow pirouette as she spoke. 'I have been everywhere and nowhere and now, I am here.' She stopped and stared at him. He recognised the look, though her eyes, her face, were different.

'Why?'

'To save you. Did you get my message? I haven't sent it yet, but I thought you might have received it.' She spoke at wrong angles, tangling words in awkward shapes. It had been endearing, at first. Some of it was affectation, he suspected. The rest... insanity, possibly. Had she ever been sane, truly? Perhaps not.

She cocked her head, studying him with goatish eyes, and he wondered if she could hear his thoughts. It wouldn't surprise him. Who knew what she might've learned, in her centuries lost to the warp. He cleared his throat. 'Message? No. My apologies. I've been preoccupied. How are you, my dear?' It hurt him somewhat to see how much his creation had altered, in her time in the wilderness. She had degenerated further since the last time they'd spoken. Too much the daemon, too little the mortal. And less of the latter every time he saw her. One day, he might not even recognise his own handiwork.

'I yet persist, as you created me to do.' She ran a finger along one of her horns. 'Do you like them? I dreamed of them, waiting between worlds, and then they grew. It hurt at first. It still hurts, sometimes. When I remember what pain is.' She licked her lips. 'In the courts of the Dark Prince, there is much discussion on

the subject of pain. You are admired there, and they speak of you highly.'

'The horns are lovely,' Bile said. 'What message?'

She smiled. There was something of him in that smile, he thought. Perhaps the only thing of him remaining. A crooked smile for a crooked creature. 'I haven't sent it yet. I might not, now.'

'Melusine,' he said, warningly.

She frowned and flexed her claws, like an angry felinoid. 'A daemon whispered to me that you are marked. And all that bear your stamp with you.' She reached out and tapped one of the nutrient-tanks. He twitched, Torment half-raised. He forced himself to relax.

'Even you?'

'Especially her,' she said, looking away. 'But not me. Not yet. Not until I'm her.' She pressed a hand to his chest. 'She came to warn you. And I followed.'

'Why?' he asked, curious.

'Is that not a daughter's prerogative?'

'I wouldn't know,' Bile said. He ran a finger along one of her horns. 'I cannot decide whether this is an improvement or not.' He looked at the dissolving carcasses dirtying the floor of his laboratorium. 'Who sent them?' There were any number of potential candidates. The Eye knew no lack of sorcerers – the sons of Magnus, or Lorgar's fanatical brood.

She laughed and slid out of reach. 'I don't know. Me, maybe. Or someone else. There are entire races which spend their eternities chanting prayers for your destruction. There are worlds where to speak your name is to court death, and even one where you are worshipped as a saviour.'

Bile gestured dismissively. 'I have many enemies, yes. Which ones in particular initiated this assault, child?' If someone specific was after him, he needed to know. He had weathered such sieges before, and would likely do so again, before his work was complete. But the Legions still needed his expertise. He was too useful to kill out of hand. Or so he'd thought. He glanced down again at the remains of the daemons, wondering what had changed.

Melusine shook her head. 'Does it matter? Would it change anything?'

He hesitated. Then, 'No.' It was convenient that she had come when she had. But perhaps there was more to this than simple good timing.

Her smile became sad. 'No. Even when the fire comes, you will hold to your path. I saw it, then, in the moments to come.' She turned in a slow, graceful circle, hooves clicking against the deck. 'Do I please you? Will she?'

Bile looked down at her. 'Unintended results are still results.'

Melusine laughed. An old pain flared within him. For a moment, a child's face, perfect in all ways, swam before his eyes. He forced the image aside, trying to concentrate on the here and now. The creature before him was a perversion of his art. Yet another thing taken from him and twisted into something broken and useless. Had she come to kill him? That would be fitting, almost. The creator undone by his creation.

'You say such lovely things.' She pushed away from him. 'Beware the future. It comes for you, lean and a-thirst. It eats away at your possibilities, narrowing the span of potential paths to but a single road. You cannot go back, but neither must you go forward.'

'A singularly unhelpful statement, Melusine.' He reached out to stroke her cheek, half-lost in memory. As a child, he had seen in her the future. What was she now?

'I am but as you made me.' Her face twisted as she said it, and she caught his hand, holding it in place. He studied her, trying to find the traces of the child she had been. A new life, a new sort of being. The first of many, he'd hoped at the time. But then she'd grown and gone, vanishing into the vastness of the Eye of Terror. Then Fulgrim had cast down his edict and thrice-damned Lucius had shattered the other bio-crèches.

He smiled, thinly. He had nearly killed Lucius, then. Not for the first time, and probably not the last. He took some satisfaction from the memory, regardless. He was perhaps the only being Lucius the Eternal truly feared, for Bile knew how to render a Space Marine down to his bones while still keeping him alive. He'd come close to reducing Fulgrim's favoured pet to shrieking lumps of red meat and hiding him away, to spend eternity unable to do anything save think on his crimes.

After that, his attentions had been diverted down other, more blasphemous avenues of inquiry. Away from invention, to innovation. To improve upon familiar foundations, for the use of others. But still, he yearned to create... to craft something utterly unique.

'You were the first of the vat-born, you know. A new thing under the sun. Created before even the second-generation of primarchs I nurtured in Canticle City. Even before I reclaimed the carcass of the Warmaster.' He smiled, remembering. 'An experiment, a mingling of multiple genetic templates... including mine.'

'I am a daughter of your blood and bone,' she said. She stepped away from him and started to trace patterns in the condensation on one of the nutrient tanks.

‘Yes. You are my daughter.’ The word felt strange on his tongue. Space Marines could not breed, not without excessive modification or mutation. A check placed upon them by the Emperor. Another mistake. Why create such a race, and then bar them from achieving their full potential? Fear, perhaps. Fear of being replaced. Bile had no such worries himself – indeed, it was his intention to become obsolete. But not yet. Not until his work was complete, and his new humanity had no more need of his guiding hand.

‘Am I as you expected?’ she asked again, more insistently this time.

‘No.’ He frowned. ‘Did you know that was the only time Fulgrim ever forbade me from indulging my creativity? He was... horrified. Or so he claimed. Imagine that: a monstrosity such as the Phoenician had become, horrified by a child. I suspect that moment was when I began to take issue with that whole charade of his... Like father, like son, I suppose.’ He remembered Fulgrim rising above him, serpentine coils rattling in titanic fury. The wrath of a god, or something close. He could not recall being afraid. Even then, fear had been all but burned out of him.

‘Like parent, like child.’

‘Yes. So it seems.’ She had never called him father. He had discouraged such familiarity in those days, finding it distasteful. His attitudes had mellowed somewhat, in the intervening centuries. Encouraging paternal ties aided in strengthening bonds of loyalty between himself and his creations. Perhaps, if he’d allowed her to call him father, she might not have followed the sibilant whispers of the warp. ‘Have you come to kill me, Melusine?’

She looked at him. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. She stared into one of the nutrient-tanks. A young girl floated within, curled into a foetal ball. ‘Is she my replacement? Or will I be hers, when the time comes?’ Her tone was one of accusation. He tensed. He did not wish to destroy her, but he would. She would not be the first product of his genius that he’d been forced to put down.

‘There can be no replacing you, my child.’ Bile extended his hand, but she stepped back. He held out his hand for a moment, but then let it drop. ‘You were my first. As you shall always be. Horns and all.’

‘I dreamed them.’

‘Yes,’ he said. Her eyes grew unfocused, and her shape wavered. His finest work, but his most flawed. Soon, he suspected that she would lose all substance, and vanish entirely. Or else become unrecognizable. Why had she come? To punish him? Or to warn him? And if so, why – a scrap of filial obligation? Or because someone or something had sent her?

He did not believe in the Dark Gods. Or any gods, for that matter. But there were forces at play in the universe which he could not fathom.

‘Why did you come, Melusine?’ he asked again.

‘To warn you. I was told... I was told and so I came.’ The look she gave him was almost pitying. ‘You have so many enemies that they make war upon one another for the right to dictate your fate.’

He was silent for a moment. Then, ‘Good. If they are busy with each other, then I will have fewer distractions to contend with.’

‘They said you would say that.’

He almost asked the obvious question, but restrained himself. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except his work. Let all of the universe come against him; he would endure, and his work would endure. ‘You could stay. Your help would be welcome,’ he said.

‘Why?’ she asked, as if reading his thoughts.

‘A father’s prerogative,’ he said. Paternal consideration was alien to him. He played at fatherhood, but it was motivated more by mockery than any deep well of emotion. Was this what the Emperor had felt, when he saw what Horus and Fulgrim had become? He wanted to hold her, to clasp her to him, until she was again what she had once been. Proof of his sanity, in an insane universe. ‘Do you remember when I taught you the proper way to hold a scalpel, my child? When I showed you how to flense tissue from bone?’

She stared at the child in the nutrient-tank. ‘No,’ she said, and her voice was small. So small. His hands clenched, and Torment whined in his grip. That something of his had been reduced to such a state infuriated him. She looked at him, her face a porcelain mask. ‘I came to warn you, but I was too late, wasn’t I?’

‘No,’ he said, gently. ‘No, I am still here.’

‘I do not like talking to ghosts,’ she said. ‘Goodbye.’

And then she was gone. As swiftly as she’d appeared. Leaving behind the faintest whiff of sulphur and cinnamon. The laboratorium’s systems flickered again. Readouts skipped across his overlay, as the ship’s systems returned to normal. The Gellar field had experienced a minor disruption, but was functioning at optimum levels now.

Bile suddenly felt tired. He leaned forward on his sceptre, gazing at the nutrient-tanks. Were these children doomed to madness as well? And if so, what then? Was it all nothing more than a lunatic’s dream?

Perhaps his mind had gone, after all. Perhaps...

He blinked, studying the marks Melusine had left on the nutrient-tank. A word. Just one – ‘Father’. He laughed, as Melusine’s words came back to him: *Even when the fire comes, you will hold to your path. I saw it, then, in the moments to come.*

Bile smiled. ‘Yes, I suppose I must.’

Mad or not, he had a responsibility. A duty to bring about the next steps in humanity’s long journey towards its proper place in the universe. The galaxy would burn, and from its ashes would rise a new people. His people.

Whatever came, they would endure. They would persist.

His children.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Josh Reynolds** is the author of the Blood Angels novel *Deathstorm* and the Warhammer 40,000 novellas *Hunter's Snare* and *Dante's Canyon*, along with the audio drama *Master of the Hunt*, all three featuring the White Scars. In the Warhammer World, he has written the End Times novels *The Return of Nagash* and *The Lord of the End Times*, and for Age of Sigmar he has written the Legends of the Age of Sigmar novels *Pestilens* and *Black Rift*, the Realmgate Wars novel *Fury of Gork* and several audio dramas including *The Lords of Helstone*. He lives and works in Northampton.

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