

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**



FABIUS BILE

# LIGHT OF A CRYSTAL SUN

JOSH REYNOLDS

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Light of a Crystal Sun – Josh Reynolds

About the Author

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# **LIGHT OF A CRYSTAL SUN**

**by Josh Reynolds**

The dead alien screamed.

An impossibility, the observer felt. The dead could not scream. And yet, somehow, it did. A long, ululating cry, brittle and sharp. It rose from the crystalline shape held within the flickering confines of a specially designed sensor array, and was echoed eerily by the enslaved witches who huddled in a circle about the device. The sound scratched at the edges of the observer's enhanced hearing, before spiralling upwards into inaudible ranges beyond comprehension.

'Cease.' Electro-chargers that marked the points of the sensor array fell silent, the echoes slithering through the chamber. The witches slumped, chests heaving, eyes and noses bleeding. They were all still alive – progress, in contrast to the earlier attempts. But some were not much more than that.

The observer stalked towards the circle, the ferrule of his skull-headed sceptre tapping against the rusty deck plates, the fading light of the electro-chargers playing across the worn amethyst of his battleplate and the stretched faces stitched into the folds of the flesh-coat he wore over it. The long, segmented limbs of an ancient medicae harness, tipped by a nightmarish collection of bone-saws, scalpels and syringes, loomed over his head and shoulders.

Armoured fingers caught the sweaty scalp of one of the witches and jerked the slack-jawed psyker backwards. Blank eyes stared.

'Damnation,' Fabius Bile growled. This was the third such failure in as many hours. Biological data gathered by his power armour's sensors spilled across the visual feed of his helmet. The unfortunate psyker had shallow respiration, a weak pulse and no signs of neurological activity. It was not dead yet, but it would be soon enough. Thus, it was no longer of any use, save that it could be

processed into raw materials.

‘This one is finished. Bring another. Quickly.’ Fabius dragged the still-breathing husk upright and flung it aside, making room for its replacement. ‘Hurry,’ he reiterated, snapping his fingers. The mutants hastened to obey. They were twisted beasts, thick of muscle and brain. Many of them bore wounds – the marks of a ritual combat fought to decide who among their number would claim the honour of assisting *Pater Mutatis* in this experiment. The victors attended to him, while the losers contributed their bodies to his flesh-vats, there to be broken down into their component parts. Alive or dead, his creations had their uses.

Besides which, there were always more where they came from. The mouldering corridors of his Grand Apothecarium were home to more species than the average feral world. Some were of little use, except as chattel. But others had more specialised skills. The witches occupying the circle before him, for instance.

Introducing certain genetic flaws into a small percentage of the available abhuman population had shown commendable results. His servants harvested the resulting psykers with all due diligence, and quickly segregated them. Most were repurposed, their cerebral matter extracted and processed for scientific purposes. But others were trained, their given talents honed to precision.

Unfortunately, all the precision in the world could not make up for a lack of strength. Their minds, though powerful, rapidly broke against the barriers he had commanded that they hurl themselves at. Luckily, he had more.

As the grunting mutants stripped the rest of the brain-burnt psykers from the circle, Fabius stepped closer to the array and the crystalline fragments it contained. ‘Even dead, you seek to pit your will against mine,’ he murmured. ‘Intriguing, if frustrating. Yet even the dead can be made to spill their secrets. If I wished, I could grind you into a fine powder, mix it with organic matter taken from the appropriate sources and grow a new you. I could draw you up from your essential salts, like some savage genomancer of Old Night, but there is no telling what might be lost in such a crude process.’

His hands played across the controls for the device, making alterations to the diagnostic alignment, even as the complex calculations necessary to do so flew through his mind. The array had been built to his specifications by a magos of his acquaintance, and for the fair price of a gunship’s weight in wraithbone.

It was a bulbous apparatus, resembling a hunkered chelonian, save that its shell was splayed open like the blossom of a metallic flower. Suspended above the flower was a network of diagnostic scanners and sensor-lenses. Hololithic pict-

captures floated in a slow dance around this network, each pinpointing and enlarging a facet of the crystalline shape.

The shards of crystal had congealed into one echinodermic mass, each facet grinding softly against another as they floated within a modified suspensor field. The facets contained a cacophony of colours, some utterly alien to his senses. Beneath that riot of shades was a milky opacity, within which was the hint of... something. Faces, perhaps. Movement, certainly. 'How many of you are in there, I wonder? How many minds, colliding like chunks of frozen rock in a debris field? Perhaps I should have made a more thorough study. Then, the moment was not conducive to such contemplation, was it?'

If the awareness within the shards heard him, they gave no sign. Whether due to stubborn refusal, or simple inability, he could not say. But he intended to find out.

The shards had come from an eldar craftworld called Lugganath. On the occasion of his visit, he'd had the opportunity to collect samples from the grove of crystal seers at the craftworld's heart – trees made from the crystallised forms of the farseers who had once guided their people, located in the wraithbone core. He'd come to learn of it through his studies, and learned as well of how the farseers' spirits were preserved in some fashion within the psych-reactive bio-circuitry that permeated such massive vessels.

The thought of it brought him a shiver of anticipation. Not immortality, but close. A perfect preservation of intellect, removing it from the vagaries of the physical. The key to his own research. The key to his salvation.

Fabius grunted and removed his helmet. The face reflected in the chrome surfaces of the sensor array was not that of a man, but a walking corpse. Of one steadily consumed from within by the fires of a blight beyond any other. A genetic cancer that reduced a healthy *corpus* to utter ruination in a scant few centuries.

He could feel it within him, a black weight, resting on his hearts and lungs. It gnawed at his vitals like a hungry beast. The chirurgeon attached to his back was busy pumping various opiates and chemical calmatives into his ravaged system. The medicae harness' efforts were a medicinal firebreak against the constant pain of his dissolution.

Fabius flexed a hand, feeling the old, familiar ache in his joints. Soon, it would be time to shed this withered flesh for a new sheath. One cloned from healthy cells, awaiting only the touch of his mind to activate it. But the process of such neural transference – of trading a faltering body for a healthy one – was not

without an ever-increasing risk.

It was his hope that an answer to his problem might lie within the shards he'd sampled from Lugganath. A way of devising his own infinity circuit, and preserving his intellect across bodies, without risk of the neural patterns degrading, as they inevitably would. Once his mind was safe, he could turn his thoughts back to his great work. The only work that truly mattered: the preservation of humanity.

Not humanity as it was, obviously. But as it would be, thanks to his guidance. A new mankind, capable of weathering the gathering storm.

'But I cannot preserve them, without first preserving myself,' he said.

'Physician, heal thyself.'

Fabius turned. 'Exactly, Arrian. A simple truth, echoing throughout the history of mankind. Those who have the most to offer must make every effort to preserve themselves for the good of all. As true today as it was a millennium ago.'

Arrian Zorzi was a hulking scion of what had once been the World Eaters Legion. But he had shed the blue-and-white heraldry for grey ceramite bare of any marking except the occasional blood stain, as he had shed his old loyalties for new ones. He served a new master now, and was as able an assistant as Fabius had ever had.

Like his new master, he had been an Apothecary in more innocent times. He still considered himself such, despite the collapse of his Legion's command structure, and wore the tools of his trade proudly, including a well-maintained narthecium. A plethora of skulls, bound by chains, hung from his chest-plate, their torn cortical implants scraping softly against his armour. 'They refuse to speak, then?' he asked. As he spoke, he stroked the skulls, as if seeking to calm whatever spirits might reside within them.

'With the stubborn assurance of the inanimate,' Fabius said.

'What now?'

'We try again. I will have their secrets. It is only a matter of time.'

'Perhaps it is time to render them back onto this side of the veil, Chief Apothecary.' As always, Arrian spoke respectfully, even when pointing out what he felt was a flaw in his superior's methodology. 'We possess enough genetic matter to brew a stable clone. Why not put it to use?'

'I cannot take the risk of damaging or even erasing the very information I seek. I must have that information, and so I will, whatever the cost.' Fabius turned back to the sensor array. 'New methods are required.'

‘A more potent breed of psyker, perhaps,’ Arrian said, as the last of the brain-burnt witches was hauled away. New ones were herded into the experimentation chamber by snarling overseers a moment later. The overseers were tall, grey things, stretched and twisted into looming nightmares. Their skewed skulls bristled with psych-dampeners and other implants designed to protect them from the abilities of their charges. They prodded the nervous psykers forwards with shock-batons and guttural curses. One of the witches began to weep, as it was forced by an overseer to sit in a gap in the circle. ‘They sense death on the air,’ the World Eater murmured, watching.

‘Something they must grow used to, if they wish to have any hope of survival in this grim age,’ Fabius said, not looking up from his fine-tuning. ‘Life is not for the weak.’

‘A stronger mind might make the difference.’

Fabius turned. ‘Elaborate.’

‘One of Magnus’ lot – this is a task for a true witch, not these pitiful slave-minds. Perhaps Ahriman, even. You have knowledge he seeks. Why not a trade?’

‘Ahzek Ahriman is a deluded fool and, worse, a rapacious magpie of the first order. He would not trade. He would seek to take, whatever his promises. And I lack the stamina for such a distraction at this stage.’ Fabius frowned. ‘Besides, there is no way of telling whether he would even acknowledge such a proposal, especially from me. I doubt he has forgiven me for that misunderstanding on Aurelian’s Folly.’

Arrian visibly winced. ‘I had forgotten.’

‘He hasn’t. No, outside help is out of the question. Nonetheless, your proposal has merit. A stronger mind is required to breach the barriers of silicate intransigence. And that mind must be mine.’ He gestured towards the back of the chamber, where an array of specialised servitors waited. One lurched into motion at his signal.

The chem-servitor trundled forwards on its mono-tread, single red eye glowing with muted excitement. It was a boxy thing, with a reinforced chassis, mounted atop a swivel-plinth. A plethora of oft-patched hoses and spliced cabling spilled from its back, to connect to the small generator unit attached to the foot-plate of the plinth. Streamers of cold fog leaked from within its bulky torso, where an ancient diagnostic analyser hummed. Fabius opened a panel set below the servitor’s gilded skull, revealing rack upon rack of chemical concoctions, set into a wheel-shaped dispenser.

‘Entheogenic compound X-7-D,’ Fabius said. The servitor’s eye flashed, and

the dispenser rotated, until the selected concoction slid into the central aperture, for ease of extraction. Fabius took it. 'A potent mixture, shown to me by the savages who inhabit one of the lesser Crone Worlds. In the right doses, it can make the mind more receptive to a variety of neural stimuli.'

'And you intend to take it?' Arrian sounded concerned. Fabius smiled.

'I have done so before. Admittedly, the results were mixed, but today might conclusively prove its use as a tool of research.' Fabius glanced at the circle of psykers, and the fragments gleaming at the centre. It was almost taunting, that gleam. An invitation. Or a warning. He shook his head, annoyed by his own fancies. While it was conceivable that there might be some residual echo of personality within them, the crystals were now likely nothing more than repositories of stored information. Information he intended to acquire.

'Is this wise, Chief Apothecary?'

'No,' Fabius said simply. 'But it must be done, and my mind is the only one I trust to see to this task properly.' He beckoned and a mutant brought forward a brass-banded casket. Fabius deposited his sceptre into its silk-lined interior. The mutant closed the casket and scuttled backwards, bowing over its burden.

'The risk...' Arrian hesitated.

'It is within acceptable parameters, Arrian. And if it proves in excess, you will be on hand to separate me from the array.' Fabius held up the compound, noting the cloudy consistency with satisfaction. He lifted it, so that one of the surgeon's manipulator-claws could grasp it. The compound was set into place within one of the many chem-dispensers that lined the outer shell of the medicae harness.

'And how will I know when to do that?' Arrian asked, following Fabius to the edge of the circle.

'Use your best judgement,' Fabius said as he stepped into the circle, and sent a mental command to the surgeon. Ports set into the sides of the harness' chassis hissed open, extruding a tangle of dozens of wormlike bio-filaments.

The thin wires slithered outwards at his signal, seeking the specially prepared cerebral conduits implanted in the skull of each witch, creating a connective web within the circle. The witches groaned as one, as the bio-filaments slid into place with a series of distinctive clicks. When he was fully wired in, Fabius sent a second signal. The surgeon made a sound that might have been pleasure as it injected the entheogenic solution into Fabius' bloodstream. He extended a hand towards the sensor array, as the edges of his perception began to soften and melt away into whorls and spirals of liquid light.

‘Now... Let us begin.’

The witches began to chant in guttural fashion, using the vocal techniques they’d been taught to focus their mental abilities. He’d found the strongest chains to be those of habit and ritual – psykers required both to function at peak productivity. The techniques themselves were a variant of those employed by the long-extinct warsingers of the Isstvan System. He had prowled the ancient choral conclaves in the days after Horus had ordered the purging of the Loyalists, and culled much of what he considered useful.

The chamber began to stretch and skew about him, its angles oscillating in a dissonant fashion. Flat planes became curves, and curves rolled up in on themselves, as the hues and textures of reality bled into one another. Fabius focused his expanding perceptions on the crystal fragments. He pressed his palms together and tried to clear his mind of all nonessential thought, using the Prosperine meditation techniques he had learned in better days, from absent friends.

The lights of the sensor array reflected from the fragments with kaleidoscopic ferocity, casting splinters of pale colour across his vision. His breathing fell into a rhythm as time slowed and the world corkscrewed into a maelstrom of flickering notes. The slight creak of his battleplate became an enduring whine, the whisper of the surgeon became a shriek, and his breath thundered through him as he exhaled one last time. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them, he was elsewhere.

The light was the first thing he noticed. Light, everywhere. It invaded his perceptions, and his mind reeled momentarily before his will reasserted itself. When he could see past the glare, he found himself in familiar surroundings. ‘Lugganath,’ he murmured. Or a reasonable facsimile thereof. A memory, carved from crystal. The swooping tiers and graceful towers, winding walkways and domed gardens of a craftworld were all as he remembered. A crystal world, from its skies to the wraithbone beneath his feet.

He stood on an immense causeway, before the towering portal that he knew led to the heart of the craftworld, and the grove of seers. The way before him was encrusted with shuddering mounds of crystal that resonated with the wailing of the wind. Above him was a false sun of vast fragments. The immensity moved against itself, filling the air with an omnipresent throb.

Beneath that itching pulse, he could hear the soft murmuring of the witches in the back of his head. Their voices rose and fell alongside the throbbing clamour of the crystal sun, somehow keeping its pulsations in check, as he’d hoped. The

tatters of the eldar consciousnesses were likely not fully self-aware, but that made them no less dangerous. A flash of colour stretching across a nearby wall caught his eye. He turned swiftly and saw a familiar face.

He looked up at the wall of crystal rising before him and saw his reflection stretched across the facets. He wore no helmet. His face was fuller and unscarred. A thick mane of silvery hair was pulled back from his pointed features and bound tight in a single, coiling lock. His eyes were clear, and free of the all-too-familiar burst blood vessels and the yellowish tinge of unshakeable illness.

He was whole. Healthy.

Fabius looked down at himself. His mouldering flesh-coat and battered ceramite was gone, replaced by pearlescent white-and-amethyst battleplate, marked with the winged Cadacus. Instead of his grisly sceptre, he held a chainsword. He gazed down the length of the blade, recognising the delicate letters etched into the housing. He gave it an experimental sweep and felt the old familiar growl of its vibration. He had left it buried in the torso of one of the Khan's sons, in the final days of the Terran siege.

'A lie,' he murmured. 'Just like this place.' But it was his lie, rather than theirs. The way he had once been. 'The way I will be again, when I have what I need.'

His words echoed through the crystal world, and everything trembled slightly. He looked up and saw the enormous shards of the sun *flex*. Something had heard him. He looked towards the end of the causeway, where the grove of crystal seers waited. The answers he sought would no doubt be hidden there. Even as the thought occurred to him, the fluctuations of the crystal sun grew more evident. A sudden rush of noise, as of the shouting of many voices, buffeted him.

In the surface of crystal, he saw vague shapes take form. Memories, perhaps, or dreams. Fragments of life and death, dancing across the skewed walls and walkways like projected pict-feeds. Few of them made any sense, as if two or more separate events or recollections had been merged into one confusing tangle. Others were more recognisable – he saw scenes of hearth and home, as the eldar judged such things, and the distorted shapes of warriors of the Emperor's Children, as they laid waste to a world old before man had first sailed the stars.

And with every projected desecration, the shudders of the false sun above grew more pronounced. A phantom wind rose up from the depths of the artificial world, carrying with it a million voices. The wind tugged at him, as if ethereal claws sought to sink themselves in his armour. The murmur of his witches was

growing strained and frantic. Their strength was faltering. And as their voices failed, those that rode the wind grew louder and more distinct.

They cast words at him like stones, cursing him and trying to distract him. Malign figures, dragged bodily from eldar myth and legend, formed in the crystal walls around him – gorgon-like shapes of impossible beauty, wielding blades of starlight, strove in vain to free themselves. Grinning faces, carved into support columns, cackled wildly and roared out jests in some unknowable dialect.

‘If this is the best you can do, you may as well surrender now.’

At his words, the quaking mounds of crystal about him split, disgorging lean shapes. They resembled eldar warriors, save that they were crystal, rather than flesh. Colours swirled across their surface, darkening and then fading. The wind tore at him. He lifted his chainsword. ‘Stand aside,’ he said.

The wind ripped his words to shreds, and cast the echoes back at him. The sun seemed to draw closer to him, swelling to fill the sky. There were the hints of vast, twisted faces within its shifting planes. He heard a witch scream in agony, and a bright, white-hot pulse of sympathetic pain shot through him. He grimaced and shook his head to clear it. The strain was proving too much for his creations. Another flaw in need of correction.

‘Fine, then. You will reveal to me your secrets, whatever barriers you throw up in my path.’ Fabius revved the chainsword for emphasis. ‘I wage a war of survival, old ghosts – and you are already dead. There is no contest.’

The crystal automatons sprang forwards, moving with shimmering grace. Fabius spat a curse and lunged to meet them. He swept the chainsword out, and crystal shards pelted his battleplate. He bulled through their ranks, shielding his face with his free hand as best he could. More warrior-shapes ascended from the splintering ground and flung themselves at him, seeking to drag him down through sheer weight of numbers. He lashed out with hands and feet, smashing them aside, trampling some and simply flinging others from his path.

He reached the doors a moment later, and he crashed into them bodily. They slammed open and came apart with a sound like shattering glass. He staggered, momentarily off balance. Behind him, the broken doors flowed back into shape with a shrill clatter.

The chamber was as he had last seen it – a grove of crystal trees, stretching towards a domed roof. Immense columns of delicate design rose along the walls, like the ribcage of some great beast, and esoteric statuary occupied the recessed alcoves between them. The heads of the statues turned towards him, their

unseeing eyes flashing with cold light.

Vast, vague shapes crouched within the walls, floor and ceiling of the chamber, glaring at him. They were at once images and reflections, not physical, but their presence was undeniable. They paced through the facets of the chamber, like shadows slipping from wall to wall, with the turning of the light.

Fabius met their glares with one of his own. 'I was wrong. You are still aware somehow, aren't you? Even broken and separate from the whole, your consciousnesses yet persist. As mine will persist, when you have been made to give up your secrets.'

Great mouths, stretched and wide, moved in soundless demands. The weight of their minds pressed down on his from all sides. For a moment, he felt as ancient man must have felt with his back to a fire, facing the beasts beyond. Then, with a sneer, he spread his arms. 'Growl all you like. I will have what I wish from you, one way or another.'

He heard the crashing roar again, and felt a palpitation run through the crystal beneath his feet. Instinctively, his grip on his chainsword tightened. The weapon was not really there – it was but an extension of his idealisation – but it provided some small comfort. 'Have I angered you? Good. Maybe now you will listen. Show yourselves, and end this farce. You are dead, and I have bound you to my will. Acquiesce – or I shall tear this dream apart and take what I need, as I did before.' He advanced towards the trees, chainsword raised. The trees were the key, he thought. The knowledge was there, within them as it had been in the real world, and he would carve it out.

A bellow of rage shivered through the grove. Distorted, alien faces thrust towards him, as if seen through an alembic. He felt the weight of dozens of minds, all focusing on him with sudden clarity. His boast had cut through their madness. False trees twisted around, branches stretching to impossible lengths as if to throttle him. The walls bent inwards, bulging with monstrous growths.

An instant later, the chamber cracked open like an egg, and the walls fell away, revealing the false sun above. He was thrown at the shifting facets of the immensity. The craftworld grew wild around him. It was as if the whole edifice were in the process of being crumpled up. Tiers and balconies bent upwards and then fell towards him. Gaping cracks ran through the floor beneath his feet and the bowing walls, and jagged fangs of crystal surged through them.

Fabius staggered, his head in his hands, trying to block out the noise. It overwhelmed him, eating away at his certainties and senses. As he staggered, the floor began to splinter, and shards shot upwards to spin about him with ever-

increasing speed.

The whirlwind enveloped him, piercing his flesh and armour with ease. He howled in pain, and he heard the witches howl with him. He wondered if they could feel his pain, as he felt theirs. Their shrieks seemed to indicate that such was the case. He felt the embedded pieces wriggle themselves deeper and the voices of the dead bellowed in his ears. Invisible claws plucked at his mind, stripping layers away to dig into the core of him. Memories were torn to shreds, as knowledge was wrung from him. He had come to prise secrets from the dead, not lose his own.

Desperate, he flung himself backwards, out of the whirlwind. He fell heavily, blood seeping from his ravaged face. The whirlwind contracted, taking on a roughly humanoid shape in the false light of the crystal sun that loomed above. He forced himself up and swung his chainsword at it. A glittering claw of shards caught the blade and stopped the blow. Its strength was immense, and as he strained against it, the chainsword lost its solidity, becoming crystal. It shattered in his grip and the disparate pieces joined the conglomerate mass.

Fabius reeled. He glanced up and saw that the sun had become an amalgamation of alien faces, twisted in expressions of rage and grief. They spoke in voices like thunder, and as the echoes swept over him, the crystal homunculus seemed to expand. It grew and spread, sprouting arms, legs, torsos, but remaining a singular entity. Many bodies, with one head of innumerable fragments, that shone like a jewelled diadem. Many feet thudded down in a single step, as many hands reached for him. As the sun screamed alien curses, the construct it had conjured lumbered after him.

He avoided the construct's clutches, but only barely. Fingers grazed his armour, and where they touched, crystals sprouted and crumbled. He retreated, losing pieces of his battleplate the entire way. His head throbbed with the babble of dying witches, and as if from far away, he could hear the dim murmur of Arrian's voice. He pushed it aside, trying to focus. Spears of crystal thrust out at him from all directions, blocking his retreat.

He was hemmed in. Trapped. Perhaps that had always been their intent. They had drawn him in, just as their kin had on Lugganath. Then, too, he had been blinded by his desires. The construct lunged for him again. Crystal claws tore into the flesh of his face, gripping him. He howled in agony as striations of crystal slid through him. He punched at it, trying to break himself loose, as it pulled him closer. Images wavered across its many torsos and limbs. He ignored them, not wanting to see.

Fabius wrenched himself out of the construct's clutches and lurched back, sweeping crystals from his ruined armour. He felt blood filling his battleplate, and the old pain was lurking in the back of his mind. The witches' voices were fading. Not much time now. Never enough time. He had to break free of the trap, turn it back on them.

The construct screamed, many voices issuing through a single, too-wide mouth. As before, the voices crashed against him, threatening to cast him back, to impale him on the crystals that stretched hungrily about him. But he was ready this time. This was a place of the mind, and his mind was stronger than theirs. It had to be.

Fabius met their spite with his own. Their hate, with his hate. A millennium of cancerous rancour spilled from him, and congealed in his waiting hand. A familiar sceptre topped by a gleaming brass skull was suddenly in his hand. They had constructed this place for themselves, and he would take it away from them, piece by piece, shard by shard.

The construct lurched towards him, and he struck the groping paw. It exploded, and the crystal walls around him trembled. Another claw shattered. Then a leg. A torso. It retreated, wailing. He stalked after it, lashing out to smash away at the crystal cage around him. 'You think you are inviolate? Invincible, in the light of your crystal sun? Such arrogance is what cost your people a way of life. As it will cost you now.'

The air was filled with glittering debris. Walls emerged before Fabius, and he smashed them. The floor bucked, and he broke it apart. The world roiled about him, and he attacked without care. He tore himself a path, and saw the crystal-thing ahead, losing bits of itself as it stumbled along a projecting balcony.

It whirled, sweeping out dozens of arms. He broke them apart. The air stank of burning meat, and the light was fading. The crystal tiers and domes of Lugganath were gone, replaced by ruin, as far as the eye could see. Wherever he looked, a broken city rose or fell towards him. The construct grew taller, and its shimmering skull met the base of the sun, spearing into it, merging with it. The crystal sun blazed with cold fire, only it was no longer a sun, but the head of the construct itself. It spread its arms and drew the craftworld about itself like a cloak. Colours spilled out of the world and away, leaving only the absence of everything behind.

It was a giant, now, with a sun for a head, and a cloak made of millions of memories, at once the whole of the world and an extension of it. It crouched above him, looking down with millions of eyes, screaming at him with millions

of mouths. It raised a glittering talon, as if to crush him. He hefted his sceptre. ‘I will not be denied by such pale echoes as you. I have come too far, endured too much – I will not!’

The smell of burning meat was almost overwhelming now, and it ate away at everything else like acid. Cracks ran through every crystal, and the air was a solid throb of pain. Fabius felt as if he were moving in slow motion, as the sceptre snapped out, aimed at the centre of the vast claw that descended towards him.

And then, there was light.

Fabius staggered, his hearts thudding with an arrhythmic beat. His eyes were filled with blood, his ears ringing. The surgeon was shrieking in his head. He spat bile and wheeled about, hands flexing emptily. ‘What–?’ he croaked.

The witches were dead, consumed from within, as if by a fire. They slumped in their circle, a blackened ring of toadstools. The sensor array was weeping sparks and the suspensor field was shaking. Arrian stood nearby, blade drawn. It took Fabius a moment to realise that the World Eater had sliced through the filaments connecting him to the witches.

Fabius sagged, and Arrian caught him. ‘What did you do?’ Fabius hissed. Brief blooms of pain ran up and down inside him. His hands trembled like those of some withered ancient. He felt sick. Weak.

‘I used my best judgement,’ Arrian said. ‘When the witches started burning, I took it as a sign that all was not well.’

Fabius blinked blood from his eyes and pushed away from his assistant. He forced himself to stand, and turned to look at the crystal fragments. They pulsed faintly, their light diminished. He was not the only one who had been weakened. He spat and wiped blood from his face. He glanced at Arrian. ‘You did well.’

Arrian nodded. ‘What now?’

Fabius turned back to the sensor array. ‘We try again.’

Arrian hesitated. ‘Are you sure?’

Fabius didn’t look at him. ‘Bring me more witches. We will try again. And again, and again, until I have what I need. I must.’

He coughed and tasted blood in his throat. His head ached, and he could feel phantom claws digging into his mind, tearing away memories and hard-won knowledge. Pain rose in him, and he forced it back. This body still had time. It would endure long enough.

It had to.

‘We will try again,’ he repeated.

Whatever the cost.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Josh Reynolds** is the author of the Primarchs novel *Fulgrim: The Palatine Phoenix*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Fabius Bile: Primogenitor*, *Fabius Bile: Clonelord* and *Deathstorm*, and the novellas *Hunter's Snare* and *Dante's Canyon*, along with the audio dramas *Blackshields: The False War* and *Master of the Hunt*. In the Warhammer world, he has written the End Times novels *The Return of Nagash* and *The Lord of the End Times*, as well as the Gotrek & Felix tales *Charnel Congress*, *Road of Skulls* and *The Serpent Queen*. He has also written many stories set in the Age of Sigmar, including the novels *Hallowed Knights: Plague Garden*, *Eight Lamentations: Spear of Shadows*, *Nagash: The Undying King*, *Fury of Gork*, *Black Rift* and *Skaven Pestilens*. He lives and works in Sheffield.

Exiled Emperor's Children Apothecary Fabius is drawn back to the Imperium in search of a secret that could save his life...



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