

The background of the cover is a dramatic, apocalyptic landscape with a cloudy, orange-hued sky and dark, jagged rock formations. The central figure is a large, heavily armored character with a purple and gold color scheme. He has a bald head with long, thinning grey hair on the sides. His armor is intricate, featuring gold plates, rivets, and mechanical components. He has multiple arms: his left arm is a large, green, mechanical arm ending in a multi-barreled weapon; his right arm is a red, mechanical arm ending in a skull-shaped gauntlet. He is holding a large, golden skull in his right hand. The overall tone is gritty and intense.

WARHAMMER
40,000

FABIUS BILE
PRIMOGENITOR

JOSH REYNOLDS

The cover art features a central figure, Fabius Bile, a Primogenitor, depicted as a heavily armored, multi-limbed creature. He has a human-like face with a stern expression and long, thin white hair. His body is covered in intricate, dark purple and gold armor. He has multiple arms: some are mechanical with green and red components, while others are more organic, ending in golden skulls. He is holding a large, ornate golden skull in his left hand. The background is a dramatic, apocalyptic landscape with a bright orange and yellow sky, suggesting a sunset or sunrise, and dark, jagged rock formations. The overall tone is gritty and intense.

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FABIUS BILE
PRIMOGENITOR

JOSH REYNOLDS



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WARHAMMER 40,000

It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of

those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

PART ONE

THE PRODIGAL



CHAPTER ONE

DEAD-ALIVE

Oleander Koh strode across the dead city, humming softly to himself.

The dry wind scraped across his garishly painted power armour, and he hunched forward, leaning into the teeth of the gale. He relished the way it flayed his exposed skin. He licked at the blood that dripped down his face, savouring the spice of it.

Oleander's demeanour was at once baroque and barbaric. It was fitting, given that he had left a trail of fire and corpses stretching across centuries. His power armour was the colour of a newly made bruise, and decorated with both obscene imagery and archaic medicae equipment. Animal skins flapped from the rims of his shoulder-plates, and a helmet crested with a ragged mane of silk strips dangled from his equipment belt, amongst the stasis-vials and extra clips of ammunition for the bolt pistol holstered opposite the helmet. Besides the pistol, his only weapon was a long, curved sword. The sword was Tuonela-made, forged in the secret smithy of the mortuary cults, and its golden pommel was wrought in the shape of a death's head. Oleander was not its first owner, nor, he suspected, would he be its last.

Unlike the weapon, he had been forged on Terra. As Apothecary Oleander, he had

marched beneath the banners of the Phoenician, fighting first in the Emperor's name and then in the Warmaster's. He had tasted the fruits of war, and found his purpose in the field-laboratories of the being he'd come to call master. The being he had returned to this world to see, though he risked death, or worse, for daring to do so.

He had been forced to land the gunship he'd borrowed some distance away, on the outskirts of the city. It sat hidden now among the shattered husks of hundreds of other craft, its servitor crew waiting for his signal. There was no telling what sort of defences had been erected in his absence. And while he'd sent a coded vox transmission ahead, asking for permission to land, he didn't feel like taking the risk of being blown out of the sky by someone with an itchy trigger-finger. The few occupants of this place valued their privacy to an almost lunatic degree. But perhaps that was only natural, given their proclivities.

His ceramite-encased fingers tapped out a tuneless rhythm on the sword's pommel as he walked and hummed. The wind screamed as it washed over him. And not just the wind. The whole planet reverberated with the death-scream of its once-proud population. Their delicate bones carpeted the ground, fused and melted together, though not from a natural heat. If he listened, he could pick out individual strands from the cacophony, like notes from a song. It was as if they were singing just for him. Welcoming him home.

The remains of the city – their city – rose wild around him, a jungle of living bone and wildly growing hummocks of rough psychoplastic flesh. The city might have been beautiful once, but it was gorgeous now. Silent, alien faces clumped on wraithbone walls like pulsing fungi, and living shadows stretched across the streets. Eerie radiances glistened in out-of-the-way places and tittering, phosphorescent shapes skulked in the broken buildings. A verdant madness, living and yet dead. A microcosm of Urum, as a whole.

Urum the Dead-Alive. Crone world, some called it. Urum was not its original name. But it was what the scavengers of the archaeomarkets called it, and it was as good a name as any. For Oleander Koh, it had once simply been 'home'.

Sometimes it was hard to remember why he'd left in the first place. At other times, it was all too easy. Idly, he reached up to touch the strand of delicate glass philtres hanging from around his thick neck. He stopped. The wind had slackened, as if in anticipation. Oleander grunted and turned. Something was coming. 'Finally,' he said.

Gleaming shapes streaked towards him through the ruins. They shone like metal in the sunlight, but nothing made of metal could move so smoothly or so fast. At least nothing he'd ever had the misfortune to meet. They'd been stalking him for a few hours now. Perhaps they'd grown bored with the game. Or maybe he was closer to his goal than he'd thought. The city changed year by year, either growing or decaying. He wasn't sure which. Perhaps both.

The sentry-beasts were low, lean things. He thought of wolves, though they weren't anything like that. More akin to the sauroids that inhabited some feral worlds, albeit with feathers of liquid metal rather than scales, and tapering beak-like jaws. They made no noise, save the scraping of bladed limbs across the ground. They split up, and vanished into the shadows of the ruins. Even with his transhuman senses, Oleander was hard-pressed to keep track of them. He sank into a combat stance, fingers resting against the sword's hilt, and waited. The moment stretched, seconds ticking by. The wind picked up, and his head resounded with the screams of the dead.

He sang along with them for a moment, his voice rising and falling with the wind. It was an old song, older even than Urum. He'd learned it on Laeran, from an addled poet named Castigne. 'Strange is the night where black stars rise, and strange moons circle through ebon skies... songs that the Hyades shall sing...'

Prompted by instinct, Oleander spun, his sword springing into his hand as if of its own volition. He cut the first of the beasts in two, spilling its steaming guts on the heaving ground. It shrieked and kicked at the air, refusing to die. He stamped on its skull until it lay still. Still singing, he turned. The second had gone for the high ground. He caught a glimpse of it as it prowled above him, stalking through the canopy of bone and meat. He could hear its jagged limbs clicking as it moved. His hand dropped to his pistol.

Something scraped behind him. 'Clever,' he murmured. He drew the bolt pistol and whirled, firing. A shimmering body lurched forward and collapsed. Oleander twirled his sword and thrust it backwards, to meet the second beast as it leapt from its perch. Claws scrabbled at his power armour, and curved jaws snapped mindlessly. Its eyes were targeting sensors, sweeping his face for weakness. Oleander stepped back and slammed the point of his sword into one of the twisted trees, dislodging the dying animal.

He prodded the twitching creature with his weapon. It was not a natural thing, with its gleaming feathers and sensor nodes jutting from its flesh like spines. But then, this was not a natural world. The sentry-beast had been vat-grown, built from base acids, stretched and carved into useful shape. Idly, he lifted the blade and sampled the acrid gore that stained it. 'Piquant,' he said. 'With just a hint of the real thing. Your best work yet, master.'

Oleander smiled as he said it. He hadn't used that word in a long time. Not since he'd last been here. Before Urum's master, and his, had exiled him for his crimes. Oleander shied away from the thought. Reflecting on those last days was like probing an infected wound, and his memories were tender to the touch. There was no pleasure to be had there, only pain. Some adherents of Slaanesh claimed that those things were ever one and the same, but Oleander knew better.

He kicked the still-twitching body and turned away. Something rattled nearby. The

sentry-beasts made no noise, save for that peculiar clicking of their silvery carapace. More of them burst out of the unnatural undergrowth and converged on him. Foolish, to think there were only three. Excess was a virtue here, as everywhere. ‘Well, he who hesitates is lost,’ he said, lunging to meet them. There were ten, at least, though they were moving so swiftly it was hard to keep count.

Beak-like protuberances fastened on his armour as he waded through them. Smooth talon-like appendages scraped paint from the ceramite, and whip-like tails thudded against his legs and chest. They were trying to knock him down. He brought his sword down and split one of the quicksilver shapes in half. Acidic ichor spewed upwards. He fired his bolt pistol, the explosive rounds punching fist-sized holes in his attackers.

All at once, the attack ceased. The surviving sentry-beasts scattered, as swiftly as they had come. Oleander waited, scanning his surroundings. He’d killed three. Someone had called the others off. He thought he knew who. He heard the harsh rasp of breath in humanoid lungs, and smelled the rancid stink of chem-born flesh.

Oleander straightened and sheathed his sword without cleaning it. ‘What are you waiting for, children?’ He held up his bolt pistol and made a show of holstering it. ‘I won’t hurt you, if you’re kind.’ He spread his arms, holding them away from his weapons.

Unnatural shapes, less streamlined than the sentry-beasts, lurched into view. They moved silently, despite the peculiarity of their limbs. They wore the ragged remnants of old uniforms. Some were clad in ill-fitting and piecemeal combat armour. Most carried a variety of firearms in their twisted paws – stubbers, autoguns, lasguns and even a black-powder jezzail. The rest held rust-rimmed blades of varying shapes and sizes.

The only commonality among them was the extent of the malformation that afflicted them. Twisted horns of calcified bone pierced brows and cheeks, or emerged from weeping eye sockets. Iridescent flesh stretched between patches of rank fur or blistered scale. Some were missing limbs, others had too many.

They had been men, once. Now they were nothing but meat. Dull, animal eyes studied him from all sides. There were more of them than there might once have been, which was something of a surprise. Life was hard for such crippled by-blows, especially here, and death the only certainty. ‘Aren’t you handsome fellows,’ Oleander said. ‘I expect you’re the welcoming party. Well then, lead on, children, lead on. The day wears on, the shadows lengthen and strange moons circle through the skies. And we have far to go.’

One of the creatures, a goatish thing wearing a peaked officer’s cap, barked what might have been an order. The pack shuffled forward warily, closing ranks about Oleander. It was no honour guard, but it would do. Oleander allowed the mutants to escort him deeper into the city. While he knew the way perfectly well, he saw no

reason to antagonise them.

Their ranks swelled and thinned at seemingly random intervals as the journey progressed. Knots of muttering brutes vanished into the shadows, only to be replaced by others. Oleander studied the crude heraldry of the newcomers with some interest. When he'd last been here, they had barely known what clothes were. Now they had devised primitive insignia of rank, and split into distinct groups – or perhaps tribes. Perhaps the changeovers were due to territorial differences.

Whatever their loyalties, they were afraid of him. Oleander relished the thought. It was good to be feared. There was nothing quite like it. The beasts who surrounded him now were more human-looking. They were clad in purple-stained rags and armour marked with what might have been an unsophisticated rendition of the old winged claw insignia of the Emperor's Children. It amused him. They likely had more in common with the men they aped than they could conceive. Both were far removed from their creator's intended ideal.

His amusement faded as the palace at last came into sight. Its delicate tiers stretched gracefully up towards the blistered sky. Chunks had been gouged out of its curved walls, to allow for the addition of multiple power sources, rad-vents and gun emplacements. It was akin to a beautiful flower, encrusted with a bristling techno-organic fungus. Rubble had been cleared from the broad avenue leading up to the main entrance. A crude shanty town, built from debris, had sprung up around the outer walls of the ancient structure.

More than once, he saw what could only be barbaric shrines, and statues decorated with articulated bones and offerings of stitched skin and gory meat. Mutants chanted softly to these statues, and he heard the words 'Pater Mutatis' and 'Benefactor' most often. The Father of Mutants. He wondered whether the object of such veneration was pleased by the acknowledgement, or annoyed by its crudity.

Unseen horns blew a warning, or perhaps a greeting, as Oleander and his escort moved along the avenue. The wind had picked up, carrying with it the ever-present screams of the ancient dead, as well as the barks and howls of the shanty town's debased population. Dust roiled through the air, momentarily obscuring the ruins around him. Oleander briefly considered putting his helmet back on, but discarded the idea after a moment. It was hard to sing, inside the helmet. 'Song of my soul, my voice is dead, die thou, unsung, as tears unshed...'

Abruptly, the cacophony rising from the shanty town died away. The only sounds left were the phantom screams and Oleander's singing. But these too faded as the sound of heavy boots crunching stone and bone rose up. Oleander could barely make out the approaching figure through the dust and the wind. He reached for his bolt pistol.

'No need for that, I assure you.' The vox-link crackled with atmospheric distortion, but the voice was recognisable for all that. Oleander relaxed slightly, though not

completely. The dust began to clear. A large shape stepped forward.

The warrior's power armour had been painted white and blue once, but now it was mostly scraped grey or stained brown with blood and other substances. Black mould crept across the battle-scarred ceramite plates, like oil across snow. A sextet of cracked skulls hung from the chest-plate, wreathed in chains. More chains crisscrossed the Space Marine's torso and arms, as if to keep something contained. Like Oleander, he also wore the accoutrements of an Apothecary, though his had seen far more use, under heavier fire. A curved falx blade was sheathed on either hip.

'Waiting for me?' Oleander said. He kept his hand on the grip of his bolt pistol.

'I heard the beasts howling,' the other said. He reached up and unlatched his helmet. Seals hissed and recycled air spurted as he pulled it off, revealing a familiar, scarred face. He'd been handsome, once, before the fighting pits. Now he resembled a statue that had been used for target practice. 'And here you are. Still singing that same dreadful dirge.'

'No mask, no mask,' Oleander said, finishing the song.

'Learn a new tune,' the other said.

'You were never a music lover were you, Arrian?' Arrian Zorzi had once served at Angron's pleasure, on the killing fields of the Great Crusade. Now he obeyed a new master. Oleander thought Arrian had traded up, if anything.

Angron had been a puling psychopath even before he'd taken his first steps towards daemonhood. Worse even than glorious Fulgrim, whose light was as that of the sun. A master you chose was better than one chosen for you. At least that way, you had no one to blame but yourself.

'Exile agrees with you, brother.' Arrian's voice was soft. Softer than it ought to have been. As if it came from the mouth of some inbred outer-rim aristocrat, rather than a savage draped in skulls and chains. A considered affectation. Another way of chaining the beast inside.

'I left of my own volition.'

'And now you're back.'

'Is that going to be a problem?' He would only have time for one shot, if that. Arrian was fiendishly quick, when he put his mind to it. Another memento of years spent wading in someone else's blood, for the entertainment of a screaming crowd.

'No.' Arrian's fingers tapped against the hilt of one of his swords. 'I bear you no particular malice today.' He reached up to stroke one of the skulls. The cortical implants dangling from it rattled softly.

'And them?' Oleander said, indicating the skulls. The skulls had belonged to the warriors of Arrian's former squad. All dead now, and by Arrian's hand. When a warhound decided to find a new master, bloodshed was inevitable.

'My brothers are dead, Oleander. And as such only concerned with the business of

the dead. What about you?’

‘I want to see him.’

Arrian glanced over his shoulder. He looked down at his skulls, and tapped one. ‘You’re right, brothers. He’s watching,’ he said, to the skull.

‘Is he, then?’ Oleander said. He turned, scanning the desolation. When he turned back, Arrian was leaning against the archway. He hadn’t even heard the World Eater move.

‘He’s always watching, you know that. From inside as well as out,’ Arrian said. ‘Enter, and be welcome once more to the Grand Apothecarion, Oleander Koh. The Chief Apothecary is expecting you.’



CHAPTER TWO

THE GRAND APOTHECARION

Their footsteps echoed hollowly in the cavernous spaces of the shattered palace. Oleander and Arrian walked side by side through the entry halls, past defensive hard points. Urum had come under attack more than once since Bile had established his laboratories there. The two moved in easy silence. They'd never had much to talk about, even in better times. Now, Oleander could feel Arrian surreptitiously studying him. Sizing him up for the chopping block, perhaps. Arrian had always been the most loyal of all of them to Bile's ideal, for reasons of his own. But then, what else could one expect of a warhound?

'New sword?' Arrian said.

'My last one broke.'

'You always were quite hard on them, as I recall. A Tuonela mortuary sword. A fine weapon for a fine warrior.' Arrian cocked his head. 'What are you doing with it?'

'Spoils of war,' Oleander said. 'I had to shoot its owner.'

'In the back?'