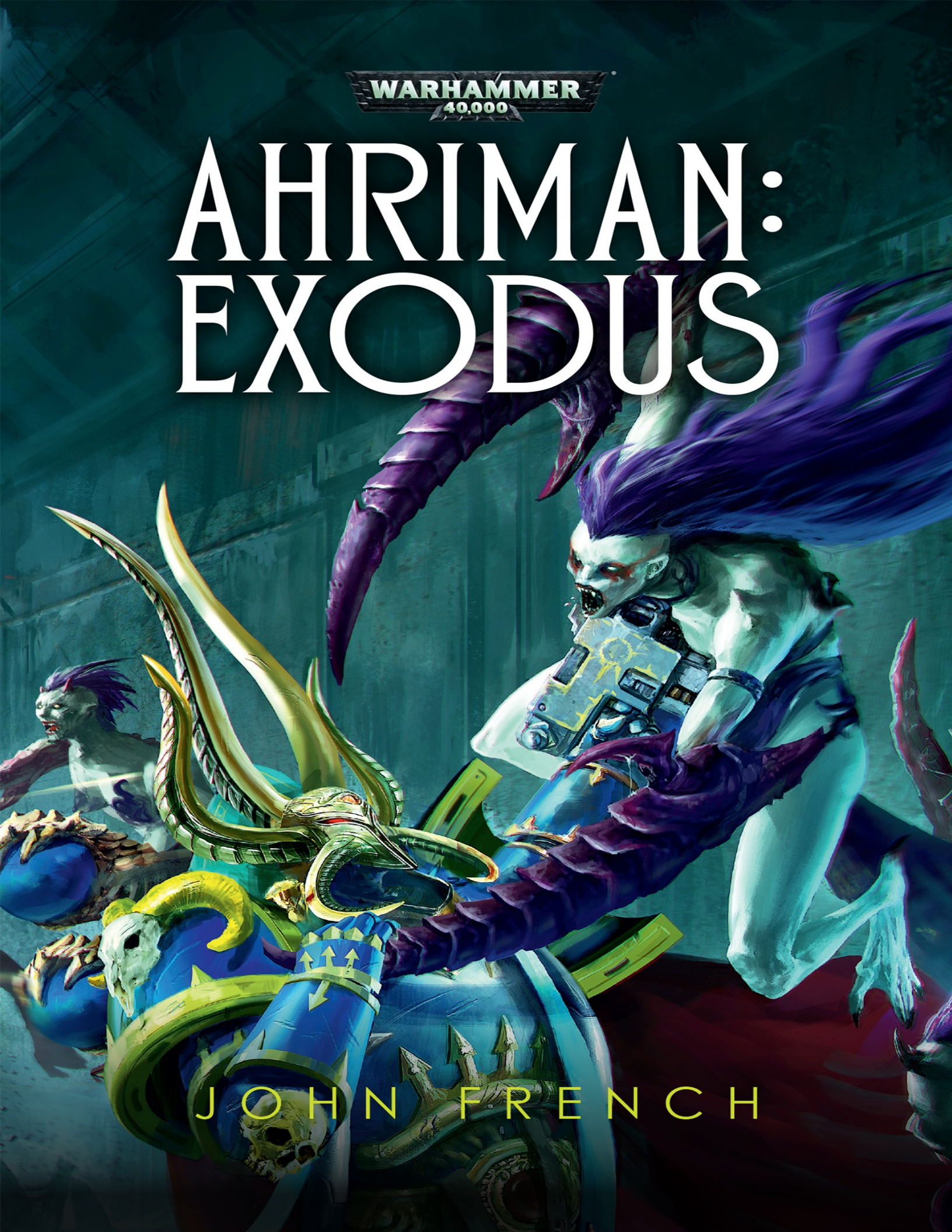


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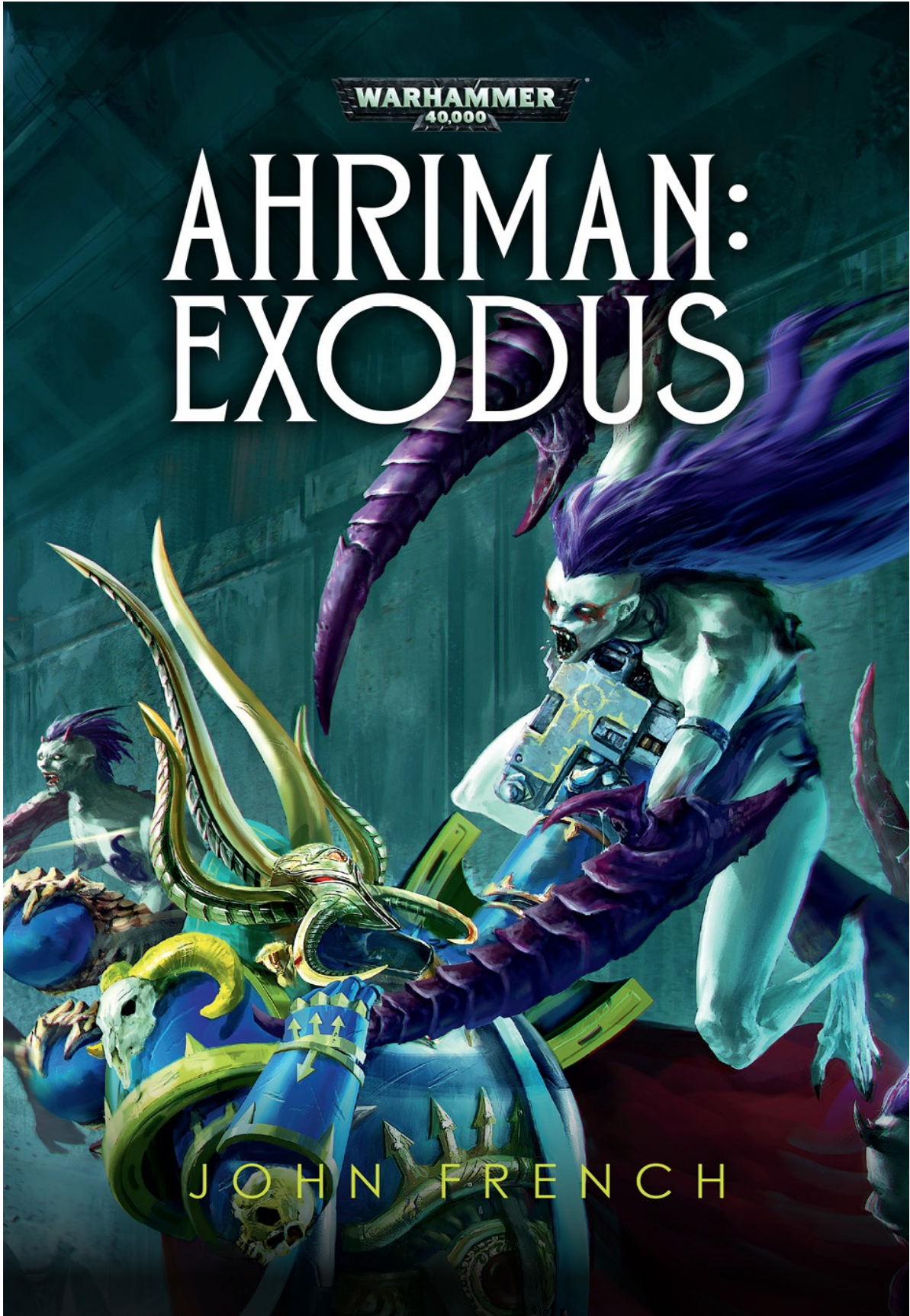


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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He 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.



THE TALE OF CTESIAS



I

THE DEAD ORACLE

*'To leave is to arrive.
To arrive is to leave.'*

– words inscribed within the Temple of the Corvidae

These words are not written to be read. They are written so that something will remain, so that I may still remember something of my life when memory fades and flesh becomes dust. It has not been a kind life. I do not say that from resentment – the universe is a cruel cradle. Kindness, happiness, contentment, these are the lies that we wrap ourselves into as we stagger through the hungering night. We are nothing but candles burning down to darkness. This is the truth. To believe anything else is to be blind.

I lived, though. I cut a path through existence, one breath, and one heartbeat, at a time. When I look back from the gate of oblivion, I would see the road behind me. I would know how I lived. And so I write that I may remember.

I was not born on Prospero. I was not born on Terra. My name is not the name I was first given. The soul I have is not the one I was born with. I was many things that I am no longer. I was a warrior. I was a scholar. I was a loyal son of a loyal son.

What am I now?

I am the universe's spite poured into a vessel for its own amusement. I am a servant of many masters, a summoner and binder of creatures that neither live

nor die. I am an old demi-god, withered by knowing, and weighed down by living. I am this tale's teller. I am Ctesias, and this road that these words walk was mine.

There are many ways that I might start this journey, but I will begin with a return. I will begin with the Dead Oracle.

The daemon rose through the night before me.

I knew I was dreaming. I could feel the unreal substance of it around me, as light as warm wind, as cold as deep oceans. I knew that anything I saw, or heard, was not real, and that kindled something close to fear in me.

Perhaps that surprises you, but dreams are not what you think. They are not your mind scrabbling through the detritus of experience. They are not the universe babbling meaning to you as you slumber. They are the point at which your soul meets all the truths you cannot see. A dream is the most dangerous place that you can go, and you go ignorant and unarmed.

I am not ignorant, and in the land of the mind I am far from unarmed.

But as I looked at the daemon I knew that something was wrong. Very wrong.

I have not dreamed for a thousand years. It is not something I can risk. It is not something I thought I was capable of anymore. And this was not simply a dream. It was a manifestation.

The daemon's shape formed as it moved, smudging depth and substance from smoke. Its body resembled a feathered lizard. Nine short legs broke its flattened bulk, each toe tipped with a mouth and tongue. Its head was a cluster of snapping jaws, and slitted, yellow eyes. I could hear voices, laughter and pleading just on the edge of hearing.

I knew the daemon. It had been my hand that had unleashed this creature upon the Silvered Host at Cvenis, and seeded its soul parasite into Taragrth Sune. It had many names amongst mortals – Chel'thek, The Dragon of the Hundredth Gate, The Speaker of Infinity – but only I knew its true name, and so only I held its chain of slavery. Given that, and where my body lay, its presence was more than just a problem. It was a sign.

'You,' I said, my voice heavy with false authority, 'are not supposed to be here.'

The daemon's mouths clacked open and shut.

'But I am, little mage,' it breathed. 'I am here.'

'I have your name,' I said. 'Your passing is at my sufferance. You rise into being at my will.'

It laughed with the sound of cracking cartilage.

‘Command me then, half-mortal. Bid me back to the dark. The chains rust, and fire pours upon the days as yet unborn. The chiming of the broken bells calls this doom. The Three will defy your exodus. They will drag you apart from within, and eat your carcasses as they cool.’ It grinned with a thousand mouths. *‘You are hunted. You and your master.’*

‘I have no master.’

Its laughter clattered out again, its flesh shivering beneath copper feathers.

This is the way of daemons. Like predators of old Terra, they posture, growl and magnify their appearance to cover weakness. But, like the growl of the wolf and the snarl of the lion, it is bravado that breathes from between sharp teeth.

‘Everything has a master,’ it smiled a wide, sagging smile. *‘But you are not mine.’*

It had gone snake-still. I had to act now.

It burst towards me.

I began to form the thing’s name, reaching into the compartments of my mind to unlock, and combine each fragment.

‘Sah-sul’na’gu...’

The syllables sprayed from my lips, but the daemon was already lunging at me, its body growing as it moved. Its skin tore, arms reaching from within its swelling form. Fingers stretched and became razors of bone.

‘...th’nul’gu’shun-ignal...’

The skin of the dream clogged and stretched as I spoke. Sounds of tearing skin and weeping cries stole the daemon’s roar.

‘...g’shu’theth...’

Un-words poured from me. They burned in the idea of air. The daemon’s body began to crumble, skin and meat hissing to slime. Flesh stripped from its reaching claw. The last component of its name unlocked in my mind.

‘...ul’suth’kal!’ I spat the last piece of it.

The daemon froze. Shivering in place, the edges shimmering to nothing.

‘You.’ The daemon’s voice hissed from its dissolving throat. *‘Are. Weak.’*

‘Not yet,’ I said, and thrust it back into oblivion.

I woke to the smell of burning flesh. It was my own. Thick ropes of oily smoke climbed above where the silvered manacles held my limbs in place. The alchemical feeds that had been dripping false sleep into my veins had melted, and hung in blackened tangles from the brass armatures above me.

I tried to move my head. Some of the skin of my neck ripped away as I

moved – it had fused to the metal loop beneath my chin. I could feel my flesh struggling to blot out the pain. Other warriors of the Adeptus Astartes would have shrugged off such sensations, but not me.

I was old even then, and my flesh had withered on my bones. The strength of muscle and blood is just one thing that I have given up as payment for power. I could still wield a sword, though I preferred a staff, and I could shatter a skull between my fingers. But these are small things for our kind. They do not undo the truth that then, as now, my skin was a wrinkled mask over a frame of thinned bones and spindly limbs. Lank, white hair hung from the shrivelled root of my head. My pale eyes were just as they were when I was born, but fragments of emerald and gold had replaced my teeth. A kaleidoscope of inked sigils covered me from head to foot, hiding the scars beneath letters and pictograms from long dead languages. In body, as in soul, I was a memorial to my own mistakes.

The room in which I hung, bound to a frame of silver and cold iron, was a cell. Warding marks and patterns were cut into its narrow walls and floor. Most of the wards had bled outwards, like wax blasted by a fusion torch. I knew the meaning of each symbol, and knew that they should have stopped the daemon manifesting in my dream, just as they had stopped me summoning aid from the warp. They, and the silver manacles, and the alchemically created coma, were supposed to hold me until I agreed to serve Amon, or until another end was found for me. I had refused to serve and so had lain, chained in sleep, in the heart of the ship *Sycorax*.

Now the chains had fallen and I was awake.

I moved my head again, and this time the pain came clear and bright. I let out a hissing breath.

‘Brother,’ said a voice from just out of sight.

I froze. I knew the voice, but its presence was an impossibility. It simply could not be.

I was very still. The pain of my burned limbs and the stink of the room said this was no dream, but such is the subtlety to truly great lies – they appear more real than reality, more true than truth.

‘Ctesias,’ said the impossible voice. And then, just as impossibly, he stepped into sight.

The first thing I noticed was that he had not changed. His face was just as it had been: blue eyes set in a proud face, features held so still that he appeared always to be listening to something just out of hearing. So many of our kind are touched and twisted by the winds of the Eye that to see one so untouched by mutation is

almost disturbing.

‘Ahriman,’ I breathed.

He nodded.

My eyes shifted over his silver-blue robes, azure armour, and the horned helm held in the crook of his left arm. I recognised both armour and helm – I had last seen them worn by Amon, my jailer, and their change of ownership could only mean one thing.

‘So,’ I said, ‘Amon is no more.’

‘Our brother...’ began Ahriman, but I could already hear the sorrowful words he was going to voice without hearing them.

‘Please spare me whatever you think you need to say.’ I looked into his cold gaze. The pain from my burns was needle-shrill. I ignored it. ‘I do not grieve for him. He was a fool, as are you, Ahzek.’

His flat calm face did not twitch, but he looked as if he was going to reply. I saved him the effort.

‘You have either come to free me, or to ask for service,’ I said. ‘Or you are salving your conscience before you add me to the tally of our dead brothers.’

Understand that I am not a creature of emotions. My blood does not rise and fall with talk of brotherhood, of honour or heritage. My days of loyalty, of feeling bound and compelled by kinship, ended long ago. I am a creature of the true universe – my bonds are bonds bought and paid for, my loyalty to nothing more than the expansion of my own ability to persist from one moment to the next. Ahriman knew that. He could scarcely have forgotten.

After a long moment, he nodded. The wards and manacles holding me flared with fresh fire, and I felt the touch of his mind ghost over me. It was pure agony. I made sure that the renewed pain did not touch my face. To show weakness is to invite enslavement.

‘I need your help, Ctesias.’

‘My help? And what can you offer for that help? More to the point, why do you need it?’

‘Things have changed.’

‘Where Amon stood, now you stand. You are master of an army of our exiled kin who, until so recently, were hunting you across existence. An unenviably difficult position. And if that is the case, as I suspect it is, then you still have not lost the habit of understatement.’

He nodded once. ‘I do not know if I can trust them.’

‘But you know that you can’t trust me, and that makes me... what, trustworthy?’

The irony is quite pointed, don't you think?

'Will you follow me as you once did, brother?'

I let my head rest back against the frame holding me. 'What do you offer?' I asked, and let my eyes flicker closed. The warp was a thin, aching presence against my mind, its full weight held back by the remaining wards.

Silence grew in the moment, swallowing the beat of my hearts, and the sound of my own breath. Everything was suspended, held in place as though by the touch of a hand. And beyond that silence, Ahriman's mind hung – a cold star drawing heat and light into its core. The power of him almost stilled the breath in my mouth.

I am not blind to Ahriman's failings. I do not like him, and he returns that scorn in full measure, I am sure. We are different in every way that matters. But any who deny that he is the most terrifying being to walk the mortal plain is a liar, or a fool.

I opened my eyes.

He had not moved, but his focus had hardened. I felt as though he was inches away from me, breathing my air, looking through the windows of my eyes, seeing the ambitions in my broken soul. Cold needles slid through my mutilated memories, and I knew that he was seeing every bargain, every scrap of my life traded for the one thing that I needed above all else. And I knew that he saw why, and I knew that he understood.

I hated him in that moment, hated him more than the simple dislike of two siblings made to make all the wrong decisions for different reasons. My hatred fumed from me in the silence, answering and pleading in equal parts. That sudden, bright emotion surprised me – it felt like the return of a life I had cast away.

It was, of course. That was exactly what it was.

'What do I offer you, Ctesias?' he said at last, his voice low. 'I offer you everything you have searched for.'

I know that my eyes went wide at that, because he nodded.

'I offer you your dreams.'

I would understand later why Ahriman truly needed me. It had nothing to do with trust, or power, at least not as I had thought of it. He knew me better than I knew myself, better than he knew himself as a matter of fact. He always saw others so clearly, and himself so dimly. At the time, though, I thought of his offer as one of old fashioned simplicity: the promise of reward, and the threat of retribution for betrayal. It was enough.

‘Free me,’ I said, ‘and I will serve.’

‘As you wish,’ he replied, and I felt the warded silver of my restraints shatter. Pain lanced through me, as metal fragments showered into the air, and then stopped dead. I fell to the floor and lay in a tangled heap, breathing hard for a long minute.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked.

Ahriman had already turned away. He paused at my words, and turned his head to cast a single-eyed stare back at me.

‘You are starting something,’ I said, peeling myself from the floor. ‘That is what you are doing, isn’t it? Why Amon is dead, and why you wear his crown? I can feel it on you, Ahriman. The old dream made anew. So where do we begin?’

‘We are going to see another of our brothers,’ he said. ‘We are going to see an oracle.’

The black moon hung in folds of glowing madness, its glass-smooth surface reflecting back the brittle skins of decayed rainbows. The planets which it orbited hung behind it, vast and pale, like cataract blinded eyes looking up through silt-clouded water. The laws of nature had long fled this place. We had come deep within the Eye, to a land that existed on the blurred boundary between this and *that*, between the real and the *other*.

Our fleet had not left the warp as it arrived. There was no reality for it to return to. The *Sycorax* and its carrion flock had simply slid over an invisible boundary within the tides of the aether, and there had been the black moon – watching us, as our warships settled to stillness around it.

There were at least a hundred craft, each one different, each one marked by the Eye’s poisoned tides. The geometry of nightmares cloaked the bones of what they had once been. Gun muzzles snarled at the void with tooth-ringed mouths. Azure stained silver clung to the hulls of some, while others were sculptures of pale bone and wet gold. Swimming in the warp-thickened orbit of the black moon they looked like fish from a diseased ocean. In a sense, that is just what they were.

Between them they had enough firepower to break planets, but that power meant little in the shadow of the warp. This was our realm, the realm of paradox and possibility. The realm of sorcery.

+It is waiting for us.+

I turned from the view in the floating crystal sphere. It hung in the steam-fumed air beside the open hatch of the gunship. Astraeos – the mongrel battle psyker

whom Ahriman had adopted, for no reason which made sense to us – stood behind me, his blunt face set in an expression as bitter as it was burdened.

+We came here before,+ he sent again. +Something was waiting for us then, and something waits for us now.+

+I did not realise you had a poet's soul,+ I sent, and turned away.

He was right though. Something *was* waiting. I could feel it – most likely every soul on every ship could feel it, even if they could not understand it. My skin was clammy within my armour, and the sweet taste of vomit lingered on my tongue. Had I not warded myself many times over in preparation, then the sensations would have been much worse. Strips of tanned skin bearing seven hundred and twenty-nine incantations written in blood hung from me like feathers, rustling as I moved. A mortal had died to create the wards, but it was a small price to pay. Without them perhaps I would have felt the skitter of insects on the inside of my eyeballs, or the shiver of blade tips over my tongue. There are other ways to hold the touch of the beyond back, but I have my ways, and while Ahriman did not like them he did not object to their use.

I wondered how Astraeos was coping. Perhaps he was not. Perhaps that was why he looked as though he was trying not to explode. I hoped so.

+What he has asked of–+ Astraeos began.

+What he has *commanded* of me,+ I corrected him. +Ahriman does not ask. He is a master, and masters see their will enacted by others. They do not ask. If they do, it means only that they feel the tug of a velvet cord preferable to that of a chain.+

+What he has *asked* you to do,+ he sent, his dislike bleeding across the mental connection, +it is... *vile*.+

I may have smiled behind the twisted bronze of my face plate. +Yes. It is. That is why the task falls to me. He considers some of the necessities unpleasant enough to let others do them, but do not think that it means he will hesitate to use any method to reach his end. He never did. Even before his principles murdered our Legion.+ I smiled again, and let the image of it flow to Astraeos. +Surely you have noticed that about him? He is an idealist, but beneath his high and guiding light all the dark deeds of the soul may walk in his company.+

+You are...+

+I am surprised that you consider my arts so unpalatable. After all, what is that barb and thread I can read in your soul?+ Shock radiated from him, darkening his shadow in the warp. It was pleasing to taste. +Tell me, did you bind the creature to you, or are you also bound to it? The first is dangerous, the second

endearingly idiotic.+

He was very, very close to trying to kill me. I saw the taint of it within him.

+Yes, it has some of you, doesn't it. I see that now. Tell me, how much of your soul did it take? Please tell me you know the answer.+ I said.

His hand moved to the sword at his waist. His mind burst its bonds with a thunderous roar. I staggered. He came forwards, his will flooding the edge of his blade with fire. I admit that I was surprised – his mind was strong, stronger than I had guessed, and its power was an avalanche fall of fury.

The idea of a kine shield formed in my mind, and became real, but slowly – much, much too slowly. I am a warrior of knowledge, most particularly knowledge of the creatures that swim the depths of the warp, creatures that most call daemon. Their calling, binding and bidding are my tools. I can destroy entire civilisations, given time. Astraeos was a killer of less sophistication, but a hammer blow will not accept its own bluntness as a reason to not kill you.

The sword touched the edge of my kine shield, and I felt the barrier shredded before I could even change the pattern of my thoughts.

+*Brothers!*+

Ahriman's thought-voice was almost a physical touch in the warp-thickened atmosphere. Rebuke, entreaty and regret rode in that one word. It was enough to drain my focus and send me back a step.

Astraeos stopped dead, his halo of power vanishing like a doused fire. He stepped back, his sword flickering cold.

Ahriman walked towards us across the deck of the hangar bay. The Rubricae followed him, two lines of blue and gold armour, their movements locked into a single pattern.

+Ahriman,+ I sent, with a tilt of my head. As I have said, weakness only invites slavery or treachery, and excessive deference is the surest way of showing weakness.

Ahriman did not acknowledge my greeting. He did not acknowledge me at all. He is many things, but never weak.

Astraeos sent something that I felt but did not hear. I was looking at the other figure who walked at Ahriman's side.

Sanakht returned my look. His movements were relaxed, yet precise. His face was hidden by the silver-fronted helm that he had worn since the fall of Prospero. His twin swords hung close to his hands, the hilt of one the head of a jackal, the other that of a hawk. Besides Ahriman himself there was only one other of our brothers that I would have been less pleased to find still breathing.

He said nothing. And for that, at least, I was grateful.

+This is all that you are taking with us?+ I asked.

+This is all that is needed,+ replied Ahriman.

+You are lying, brother,+ I sent to him alone. +The aether here is bloated. It is ready to tear. Your tamed renegade is right. Something has waited here for you to return. You cannot be blind to that.+

He did not reply, but I could feel his thoughts turning over. He had received my words. +You are not blind to it, are you?+

We boarded the gunship in silence, and the world became the thrum of its engines and the red-stained light of alert lamps. Ahriman was a still statue, his face hidden beneath the high horned helm, his thoughts behind hard walls of will.

+It is not all that is needed, is it?+ I needled at him, my own thoughts turning in my head as my fingers tapped the silver half of my staff. +You do not want anyone else to see, do you? You want what we are here to do to remain a secret.+

Ahriman turned his head to me. Beside him Astraeos and Sanakht stirred, and the gunship shivered on through the void.

He did not answer.

The silence followed us through the moon. A tunnel threaded its substance, leading ever deeper, though with every turn we had felt as though we were travelling further from the centre. We walked from the gunship, mist coiling around us, swallowing the passage beyond and hiding what waited. The eyes of the Rubricae glowed with green halos, and voices seeped from them, whispering just beyond hearing. Ahriman remained quiet, and Astraeos followed his example. Sanakht alone had reacted to the deadness of the place. He had drawn his swords, and walked with them held loosely at his sides.

+Was it like this before?+ I asked, and my thought-voice echoed as sound in the mist.

...like this before?

...before?

Ahriman half turned his head.

‘No,’ he said with his true voice, the sound of it flat and dead in the still air. ‘It was not like this.’

‘That does not give you pause?’ I halted in my stride. Ahriman did not stop or deign to answer. After a second I followed, my staff clicking dully on the passage floor.

‘Well that is reassuring,’ I muttered to myself.

It was not the nature of the moon that troubled me. I am a creature who has lived many lives of mortals in a realm saturated by the stuff of manifest insanity. I have walked between worlds with a single step, and seen cities raised from nothing with a gesture. The warp is a place of horror, make no mistake, but it holds no terror of strangeness for me. But within that dead-glass moon my instincts were screaming to turn back, pact with Ahriman or no.

The warp was there – it lapped through the air and the polished glass of the walls. The substance of the place itself buzzed with the stuff of impossibility. What worried me was that it was quiet, calm, and as featureless as the surface of a deep, stagnant pool. The warp is life. It is change eternal, and the power of unbounded possibility, but here it hung over everything like a lank shroud.

And as I followed Ahriman, the Rubricae walking in lockstep behind us, the worse thing was that I was beginning to recognise its texture.

I was opening my mouth to speak when we reached the Oracle.

One moment we were walking through the mist-filled tunnels, and the next we were standing in a spherical chamber of polished stone. No door broke the sphere’s inner surface. We had simply arrived without need of an entrance.

The Oracle hung at the sphere’s centre, arms spread wide. I recognised the shape of power armour, but the warp had woven its mystery over its form. It glinted with a mirror polish, and its helm was featureless, without eyes or mouth.

The Eyeless Oracle, I thought, and it echoed through the space as though I had shouted aloud.

The Oracle’s true name was Menkaura, and once he had marched to war with the rest of the Thousand Sons. He had changed much since then, though. We all had.

He had left his name and Legion in the past, and grown to become what now hung above us. Eyes orbited his blind body, like planets around a parent star. I had heard of him, of course, and long known that he was one of my gene-brothers, but I had never come to his temple. I had never felt the need to know the future.

The Oracle did not move as we walked to the centre of the chamber.

‘Menkaura,’ said Ahriman, his voice neither raised nor whispered. ‘I have returned, brother.’ He paused. Beside him, Sanakht and Astraeos shifted. ‘I have questions.’

Still Menkaura did not move.

Prickles rose on my skin. Something shifted at the corner of my eye, and I

turned my head to look at the curved wall. A distorted image of myself gazed back at me. I licked my lips carefully, tasting the slight tinge of acid in my spit. I wanted to extend my will into the aether. I wanted to pull at the stilled mirror of this place, to stir it, to send it churning. But I did none of these things. Even though everything was telling me that we had walked into the heart of something that we had not anticipated, I restrained myself. Instead I began to prepare for the deed that I had been brought there to perform.

Menkaura. I spoke his name in a chamber of my thoughts.

Men-kau-ra. The syllables spilt and echoed within separate compartments of thought.

Men.

Kau.

Ra.

Each sound became a separate box, labelled and sealed, like a body sliced and portioned into grave jars. My mind spun over each fragment of name, preparing mental ciphers and patterns that would snap shut when I willed it. Names are more than titles. They pin our existence in place. Unname something, break its title, undo its calling, and you pull it apart. Ahriman did not want to talk to the Oracle – he wanted to chain him, and he had brought me to forge the links.

Binding a daemon is not a simple matter. It is creating a prison for a creature whose being is corrosive to existence. It requires subtly, brutality, and knowledge. One misstep, one faltering instant or error, and you do not die; you become the toy of torment for a creature of infinite spite and imagination. Many fail and are enslaved by the beings that they seek to master. So when I say that binding the soul of a living creature is of another order of difficulty, you should know what I mean. Life fights to be free of the tyranny of others. Even life twisted by and shackled to lies will claw, and thrash, and shriek before it allows another being to put a collar around its neck.

Vile.

That was what Astraeos had called what I was preparing to do. He was right. It was vile.

The formulae spread through my mind like snares set in the long grass to wait for a lion's tread, like razors set out beside a dissection table. Silently, unseen, held ready but not brought into being, it took seconds to make the bindings ready, and all the while I looked up at the unmoving, unspeaking shape of the Oracle, and knew that I was about to break what remained of its soul.

'I come to you now twice, brother' said Ahriman, and the Oracle turned to face

him. ‘As I did before, I demand the truth that is owed to all who enter this place. I submit to the ordinances of this temple, and will not pass from its doors without truth received and payment given.’

+*You should not have come, Ahriman.*+ The psychic voice was thin, as if forced out between dry, cracked lips.

‘I need answers, Menkaura. We are at a new beginning. I need to find a path into what will be. My sight is clouded, storms hide the way ahead. I need your eyes. I need you to see for us.’

+*You...*+ The Oracle trembled where it hung.

At the edge of the chamber, something moved, just on the edge of sight. I ignored it.

+*You... need...*+ hissed the Oracle.

The shape in the corner of my eye was growing, bloating like paper soaking up black ink, like a tick feeding on blood. My skin suddenly felt very warm. I could not help it. I turned and looked.

+*You need to run...*+ said the Oracle.

My eyes touched the thing that I had not seen, and I saw it then. I beheld it.

And the curtain of the world shredded.

Blood-threaded pus poured from the walls. The mirrored surface crazed. Dozens of tiny hands were scrabbling at the cracks, pulling them wider. Trees of rotting iron rose from the mire forming under our feet, shaking crowns of flayed-skin leaves. Broken backed figures stood amongst the trunks, weeping blades gripped in shivering hands.

The whole tableau unfolded with delicate slowness, but no time passed. It had been there from before we had set foot upon the moon. Everything our minds had seen had been the dried skin of a corpse left as a mask over a skull. The power to blind us was staggering. It implied something greater and deeper than the manipulations of daemons. It spoke of the hand of a god.

Time returned, and we began to fight for our souls.

Ahriman was the first to move. He turned from the Oracle, his aura the flare of a new sun. He *became* flame. A lance of white heat split the air. Daemon flesh burned with vapour. The leaves of the rusting trees ignited.

Sanakht was the next to react, fire and lightning running down his blades as he sliced through tentacles writhing from the cracked walls. Tiny figures shaped from infected fat dropped from the ceiling, cackling as they fell. Astraeos had his own sword in his hand, the air about him blurring with storm pressure. A tentacle whipped down towards Ahriman, but Sanakht’s swords stuck it three

times before my eyes had seen him move. Daemon blood began to fall, fizzing to smoke as Ahriman panned the torrent of flame across the chamber.

No, I thought, this cannot be right. They could never hope to destroy us like this. But it was as though my mind was watching from behind a thickening fog. Everything was all happening with a poured syrup slowness.

The Rubricae began to fire into the figures advancing beneath the growing trees. Bolts exploded in flesh. Cyan and rose flames spiralled around blackening bones. The warp was a clotting mass of despair, tar-thick and oozing. More famine-wasted figures were rising from the swamp, their limbs forming from the charred soup of their burned kin. They stepped towards us over sizzling heaps of fat and flesh.

Astraeos extended his hand and a line of force razored through the air. Bloated bodies split into a shower of jellied filth and entrails.

And still I had not moved. My thoughts were stuck, like the cogs of a broken clock.

+*Ctesias.*+

The voice was so weak that it was just a whisper crushed by the noise of battle. +*Ctesias,*+ it spoke again. I looked up. The Oracle hung still in the air. Black corrosion had spread across its silver armour, while foul fluids leaked and bubbled from the helm. The eyes that orbited him still turned, but cataracts now clouded them, and black webs of clotted veins spidered their surfaces. +*It is... This is not the...*+

It could not find the strength for the next words, but it did not need to. I understood the warning, even as I cursed myself for not having understood it before. Menkaura was powerful, god-blessed and warp-favoured. The power which had laid this trap for us had overwhelmed him and taken this place into its domain, but it had not been able to overwhelm Menkaura utterly. Something of him still remained even as he was consumed, inch by inch, and that part of him was fighting to warn us that the true trap had yet to close about us.

He began to shudder. His armour split. Black fluid drizzled both downwards and upwards from the cracks.

+Ahriman!+ I called, but he was a pillar of brightness, his physical form a soot shadow at the core of the inferno. The daemons were falling back, and Sanakht blurred beside him, swords weaving in arcs of ghost and storm light. Bolt-rounds lashed dead flesh in a deluge as the Rubricae fired and fired. As my gaze passed over the scene I saw a bloated daemon, with the body of an insect, fly at Astraeos. The renegade turned and cut in a single movement. The daemon split

in two, its momentum driving it onto the killing edge. It fell, wings buzzing as the two halves tried to lift themselves back into the air. Astreaos stamped down, mashing chitin and blubber beneath his boot.

+Ahriman!+ I called again, and I saw him turn, as he sensed at last what I had seen.

He was just in time to see existence turn itself inside out.

The Oracle's body ripped down its centre. The sound sawed through the warp. Blood sprayed from the split corpse, each drop a liquid black hole, a splatter of negative space falling through reality. The whole chamber shimmered, and stretched upwards. The ranks of daemons became silhouettes of smudged colour, their mouths holes into another darkness beyond.

We were no longer straddling the barrier between the real and unreal – we were within a garden of decay. We were within the warp.

A psyker is a creature whose mind is a doorway to the aether, a conduit for paradox. We touch the ineffable, but we are still flesh, still made of the dirty clay of base reality. When daemons step into the real world they begin to die, just as a fish pulled from the sea will drown in the air we breathe.

But when we, base creatures that we are, dive into the Sea of Souls, we do not drown.

We burn.

The inferno around Ahriman spread out in every direction. His shape blurred, dissolving into bright particles at the edges. Sanakht fell, convulsing, arms and neck snapping out as though a lightning bolt had passed through him. Astraeos froze, his limbs locking even as he fought to move. Screaming haloes surrounded the Rubricae, howling with faces formed from splintered light and billowing dust. I do not know how I appeared in that moment, I only know how it felt – it was as if every thought I had held in mind was being pulled by hooks, drawn out of me, and spread across a gulf which grew wider and wider. Everything that made me was a thin sheet of ideas, and memories and will. The daemons were no longer creatures of rotting bone and skin. They were the mirrors of my despair and hope, thin-faced nightmares pulled from every regret I had ever had.

Into this garden of decay slid the being that had been waiting for us. Its shape and form began as a slick bulb of pale slime. Fat and muscles bloated into being, and it swelled, taking on shape and texture like the stuttering image of a plant growing and flowering, then compressed into a few seconds. Its body was a huge mound of moist and torn flesh, its head a mass of broken horns. I could taste

burning, the thick, heavy stink of rendered fat and bone soot. The power radiating from it was suffocating. The other daemons fell back, sliding beneath the surface of my sight. It was all I could do not to let my soul spin away into the vast creature's orbit.

I knew it.

I know of many daemons. Some I have bound, others I have glimpsed, many more I have only heard of. Lesser creatures often spin names and titles for themselves, cloaking their weakness in false infamy, as a beggar who imagines himself a prince will wear a coat of bright feathers and silk. Others have no need of such adornment – their existence resounds through the warp. Titles gather to them like flies over a midden, and their power is second only to the Dark Gods that spawned them. This was one such creature.

Maggot Lord, Lord of the Plague Pit, The Seventh Leech of Sorrow, The Crow Worm – I had heard heralds weep its glory in the depths of the Eye, and seen its shadow in death of billions.

It looked at me. Not at Ahriman, not at the others.

Just at me.

It had blisters for eyes.

It spoke, the words shaking the cloud of my mind.

‘Do you hope to bind me, little witchling?’ It smiled. A thick bead of blood-marbled pus oozed from its lips. Maggots squirmed in the roots of its teeth. Its tongue was a mass of dried skin and hair.

I simply shook, fighting to gather my thoughts back into myself, to hold on to what made me.

The Maggot Lord chuckled, and patches of its skin split as its body rippled. It turned its great head to the others. The fire had fled from around Ahriman. No other sorcerer I have ever met could truly rival him, but even he does not challenge the most exalted of daemonkind unless there is no other way. Watching him, I knew that he would be searching for a way out even as the beast loomed above us.

‘You do not know me,’ croaked the daemon. ***‘We have never met, but I have watched you. I have seen you rise and fall, and rise again.’***

‘Where is our brother?’ asked Ahriman, his voice cold with control. ‘Where is Menkaura?’

‘Gone, exiled son, gone down to the pits to feed the fresh-born. Gone down to become no more.’

‘No,’ said Ahriman. ‘Your kind consume, corrupt and corrode, but you do not

destroy.'

'Do we not? The corpse mires of history and the tears shed beside graves sing a different song.'

'Give him to us.'

'No. No, I do not think I will,' said the daemon, and shook its head. White worms and tatters of flesh scattered from its rolling chins. ***'This gathering is not for demands. It is for offers, for the consideration of possibilities.'***

'You have nothing to offer us.'

The daemon's laughter boomed out, great balloons of skin pulsing in its throat. It licked its lips.

'Oh, but that is a lie.' It raised a huge hand and indicated the Rubricae, and their haloes of scattered pain. ***'You are the lord of a dead brotherhood. You tried to save what you cared for, but there is only one who can end such suffering.'*** Its voice had become the glutinous rumble of mucus filled lungs. ***'We would see an end to your hollowness, Ahriman. We would see you and your brothers rise from their dry graves. You feel pain for what they are, for what you did, and for what you think you must do. That pain can end. There needs to be no more sorrow. You can save yourself, and save your brothers.'*** It raised both its arms, fat fingers open, appealing. ***'All you need to do is ask. Let it go. Let the chains fall. You do not have to embrace this release. You just have to let it embrace you.'***

Sanakht was forcing himself back to his feet. Defiance screamed in his every agonised movement. The daemon turned its gaze to the swordsman as he rose.

'And you, Sanakht – broken swordsman that you are, would you not see the wounds to your soul close? Astraeos, sweet suffering child, the needles of guilt in your heart are lies. They can be plucked out. You can know hope again. Not just the promise of it, but the sweet, wet nectar of its truth.' The daemon looked back to Ahriman, and nodded slowly. ***'All this, the Lord of All offers to you.'***

There was no mention of alternatives. They did not need to be put into words. The hungry silence of the daemon throng told of what any refusal would mean. I was also not surprised that it made no offer to me. There is little meat on my soul to satisfy a daemon of any kind. I have bound and broken too many of their kind for them to offer me anything but retribution.

'We shall leave this place,' said Ahriman, his voice clear and hard.

The daemon shook its head again, its tattered face heavy with sorrow.

'That cannot be,' it said. The daemons encircling us heaved forwards.

'No,' said Ahriman, his voice the ring of a hammer on steel. 'By the terms

under which we came to this temple, I deny you. This is a fane of oracles, daemon. You have corrupted it, you have made its seat your own, but its chains still bind you. You sit where the Oracle once sat. You have taken that throne for your own purposes, but it is not a seat of power. It is a cage’.

The daemon’s jaw shook with anger. Folds of rotted fat trembled. It was afraid. For just as I saw the truth, so too did the daemon.

The rotten bowl of the chamber shimmered back into sight. Its excrement-slicked walls pulsed in time with the great daemon’s panting breaths. It *was* trapped. It was a creature of power, of might, but it was blind to the greater subtlety. Those currents lay in another power’s hand.

‘You who sit in the seat of the Oracle, I demand truth,’ said Ahriman. ‘Name yourself.’

‘*Sac’nal’ui’shulsin’grek...*’

The syllables broke from the daemon’s lips. The sound ripped through the empyrean, each a broken tooth of spite. The daemon reared up, mouth moving, its face splitting as it fought to keep the words inside. Blisters of blood formed and popped in the air. Its left fist crashed down in front of it, as its right rose above its head. It had to speak its name to us, but it intended to kill us before that name was complete. A great, rusted cleaver grew in its grasp as it lunged forwards.

‘*...ih’hal’hrek...*’

Sanakht met and turned the blow, his paired swords hissing as they kissed the cleaver’s tainted iron. The daemon pulled its blade back and charged, liquid bulk rolling. Sanakht spun aside, slicing as he moved. Ribbons of yellow fat and congealed blood fell from twin wounds.

‘*...nh’gul’rg’shargu...*’ The bloody words poured out as the daemon’s cleaver chopped down again.

Astraeos’s sword was a tongue of white and blue flame as it cut the beast’s arm at the wrist. The cleaver and severed hand hit the ground. Ropes of sinew lashed out from the daemon’s arm, and tried to drag the hand and weapon back onto the stump.

‘*...sal-hu’ne’gorn’shu’sai’sa...*’

It reached up with its remaining hand, fat fingers ripping at its own tongue.

Still the links of its name came from its mouth.

Ahriman had not moved, but now he turned his head to me. ‘Bind it, brother,’ he said.

And then – in that cold instant – I knew that I should never have agreed to serve

him.

‘...vel’rek’hul’scb’t’h’rx.’

The last syllable fell from the daemon’s lips, sliding into the air like a scorched snake. I looked at Ahriman for an instant that felt like eternity. My mind was ready. The divided cells of my memory and psyche, intended to hold Menkaura, stood open. I had heard each beat and splintered tone of the daemon’s name. It was mine. A net of chains lay in the fingers of my will.

I turned to the daemon. Its lesser kin had begun to move again, slithering and scrabbling forwards, blades scraping, teeth champing. The Rubricae fired: cobalt light exploded soft skulls. The daemon inhaled, its stomach and throat bulging. It vomited. Blood, bile, and shadow gushed towards us. A dome of flame met the deluge. Black smoke and yellow steam tumbled up through the air.

I was still hesitating, still unsure that I wanted to play the part that Ahriman had created for me in this layered deception.

+*Ctesias, now!*+ Ahriman’s thought voice split the warp-flooded chamber like a thunderclap.

I spoke the daemon’s name. The syllables tore my tongue and lips. Frost bloomed across my helmet. Blood was running down my throat, filling my lungs as I forced air from them.

I kept speaking, feeling the chain of sounds draw the daemon’s essence into my hand link by bloody link.

The daemon crashed forwards, hammering its bulk down upon the burning dome above us. Flesh flashed to smoke.

As each syllable left my lips I split it from my memory, and locked it within the divided walls of my mind. Others use grimoires, arcane ciphers or other ritual emblems to hold the daemons they bind. I use my mind, and write the keys of summoning on my psyche.

The daemon tilted its head back and bellowed. The rotting throng surged to answer the call.

I was drowning in my own blood. Blisters had grown and burst on my tongue. The chamber around me was lost in a fever blur.

I chewed the end of the name out, and suddenly I was on the filth soaked floor, shivering.

The others were still fighting, still hacking, still burning as the lesser daemons threw themselves at us.

Above us the daemon held still, flesh pulsing in a mockery of breathing. Its name was within me, divided and locked away, like a weapon broken into parts

until it is needed, until it is allowed to be whole again. It looked down at me, hatred in its blood and pus-filled eyes.

‘Be gone,’ I said in a cracked voice. ‘Come not again, until I call.’

Its shape broke apart, shredding from the edges, reducing until it was nothing. It watched me until the last gust of the invisible wind took its eyes.

I passed into blackness then, unconsciousness falling across thought and sensation like a knife.

The voice came from emptiness. ‘You are owed a question.’

I recognised it. It was a voice I had not heard speak with a tongue since... since... *a time*, the memory of which I have bartered away.

‘Menkaura?’ I asked, and the image of the dead Oracle appeared as though created by the name. He no longer wore his silvered armour, or eyeless helm. An open, simple face watched me from above the red armour of the Thousand Sons Legion.

I turned my gaze, and looked into the flat nothing of... wherever I was. I could feel nothing but the turning of my thoughts. It did not feel like a dream, but it did not feel real either. It did not feel like anything.

I looked back to Menkaura.

‘Ask your question,’ he said.

‘You are dead,’ I said. His face did not even move. ‘Your soul was taken by the daemons of the Plague Father. You were unmade.’

He just looked at me, unmoving, his expression blank.

‘What is your question? A question was bought, payment was made. It must be asked.’

I shook my head. My thoughts were clear, but seemed to be coming together with frozen slowness.

‘It was Ahriman’s question, and he asked it of the daemon that had taken your place.’

Menkaura did not move or speak. I smiled grimly to myself.

‘He knew that something would be there, but he kept that from me while making me ready to bind you. Lies, and half-truths, hidden ends and greater purposes. He has not changed.’ I laughed, the noise flat in the black space. ‘But he was right. If he had asked me to bind one of the exalted ranks of the neverborn I would have refused. I would never have stepped into such a trap, not for any promised reward. I should have expected the deception. I should have known. And now I have turned a creature sent against us into my slave.’ I

paused, hissing breath between my teeth. ‘*Our* slave. That was what he wanted, what he needed me for. Why dirty his hands with such things? Why swallow the poison himself?’

‘He is afraid,’ said Menkaura. My gaze snapped up to him, the words of the questions still lingering in my mouth. ‘He is afraid of what he has begun. A destiny awaits him. A chance to be many things draws closer with every step he takes. He can see that. It is like a mountain of fire burning the sky beyond the horizon. He sees its light, but not its shape. He knows that others see it too, powers that move in the mortal and immortal realms. And he fears them. He fears that he might fall on his journey, and that he might reach the end of it.’ Menkaura paused, nodding slowly as though in agreement with a voice that only he could hear. ‘He is right to fear.’

I knew then that what I was seeing and hearing was not a dream. It was something else, a scrap of unfinished time resolving itself, a conversation that needed to play out for fate to be satisfied. The Dead Oracle’s words passed through me, cold, shivering with implication.

‘That is it? He is arming himself against... against what?’

‘Against everything that could try to stop him.’

‘And he makes me a weapon for that war.’

‘He neither adds nor takes away from your nature. You are as you are.’

Menkaura began to fade as he spoke.

‘There should be payment.’ I called after him. ‘Those are the bindings on you, brother – an oracle’s words must be bought.’

He shook his head as his features sunk into the blackness.

‘The payment has already been given,’ he said, and was gone, as though he had never been.

I stared at the void.

Then I found myself looking into the face of Ahriman. There was no blink, no transition, just the brightness of lights, and the sound of the *Sycorax* suddenly in my ears. I sat in a chair of black granite, in a chamber of tarnished bronze. My armour hung from the walls in polished components, and my staff rested in a rack of bone.

+You dreamed deeply and long, brother,+ Ahriman sent.

I did not reply. I was flicking my awareness through my mind and body searching for a sign of how much time had passed.

Ahriman spoke again, this time with his true voice. ‘You have my thanks, Ctesias. I know it cost you.’

My body felt leaden, my thoughts sluggish in my skull. Fatigue washed through me. Bright colours smudged my eyes. My tongue was a dry leaf in my mouth. Any wounds I had suffered had gone, but the shadow of the binding hung over me, pressing in through every sensation. One does not simply swallow the true name of an exalted daemon and then shrug it off. Everything – as never fails to be proved true – has a price.

‘You lied to me,’ I spat back at him, my anger suddenly raw and fresh. He tilted his head, the gesture half an acknowledgement, half a question.

‘I did what I had to, brother. As did you.’

‘What are you doing Ahriman? Why did we go to the Oracle? What do you intend for us now?’

‘Us?’ he said, and the thinnest hint of a smile touched his eyes. ‘I thought you were not part of anything beyond yourself.’

I shook my head, suddenly feeling deeply tired. Ahriman nodded, and turned towards the chamber’s door.

‘Rest, brother,’ he called over his shoulder. ‘Rest, and dream.’

‘I do not dream,’ I protested, but he was already gone, and the words rang hollow in the still air. ‘I do not dream,’ I said again, more quietly, shaking my head as my eyelids flickered over my sight. My mind and limbs felt heavy, as though the act of returning to consciousness had used up my full store of energy. I was draining down into blank oblivion again, the features of my new chamber sliced away as my eyes closed.

In the black flicker of my eyelids I saw again the face of Menkaura, and heard words I was not sure had been real.

‘He is arming himself against... against what?’

‘Against everything that could try to stop him.’



II FORTUNE'S FOOL

Those who think the gods uncaring know nothing. The gods care for us all: for each pitiful spark of life born in screams, each life lived in lust and ambition and each soul passing in silence. They care for us as we care for food, water and air. We are their life: our dreams are their strength, our weakness their existence. They care for us. They need us. But to need and to care does not require kindness.

– Numious, The Illuminator of Hilicia, executed for heresy

The second service I did for Ahriman was to kill one of our own.

I am not a creature given to sentiment; that should not surprise you. But if these words I write have come to be read by another, you will know me to have been led by his thirst for power. I do not feel guilt at the lives I have taken or the deeds I have done. I have killed many, thousands certainly, millions perhaps; the number is as irrelevant as any claim that those deaths damn me, or any counterclaim that they were justified. They are beyond justification, and my soul is forfeit because I want power that mortals should not have. I am willing to seize that power.

I am a binder of daemons and dealer in terrible truths. Others call our kind sorcerers, but I am the truth of that word given form. I have flayed eighteen mortals to tease a Prince of Excess into giving me its true name, and sold my first memory for a single sigil from a lost language. I have even starved and

poisoned myself so that I could talk with the daemons of despair. Yet, having done all these things, and more, I have never flinched from any of them. But that one... *murder* I did for Ahriman all that time ago – when we were all so different, and so much was yet to happen – haunts me still.

+Greetings, Ctesias. You honour us by your presence, and your master favours both you and I by sending you.+

Ichneumon practically purred the thoughts at me as I stepped from the gunship. He did not kneel, but bowed from the waist. His slaves were already folded flat to the floor, so I could not tell if this was to mark my arrival, or if they were always like this in the presence of their lord. I watched them for a full five seconds, and let Ichneumon hold his bow. Sometimes it pays to play the game of power even over petty matters, and I had a feeling this was going to be one of those occasions.

Sugraais, I whispered to myself, through my teeth. +I am most pleased to see you, *brother*,+ I sent, resting weight and sincerity on the last sentiment. I was not attempting to hide my thoughts, and the sending would have been heard by all those gathered in the *Nonogramiton*'s main hangar deck. I sensed the prostrated throng shiver with appreciation, and caught the subtle movement out of the corner of my eye as warriors in green and gold armour shifted in approval. +The majesty of your welcome exceeds everything that could be expected.+

Another mental rustle of approval. I bit the lie off, making sure to shield my deep thoughts. There were minds within the chamber watching me, strong minds. Not as strong as mine, but powerful enough to steal truths I wanted to keep my own. Not that there was much in my thoughts at that moment that could do more than insult them. The truth was that the throng abasing itself before me was very far from impressive. There are carnivals of the Plague Father with more magnificence. Most of the throng were only nominally human. Beneath the wrappings of saffron, yellow and blue, their flesh was pale and twitching. Toothless mouths mewled and drooled silver spit from the back of one figure close to where I stood. Another seemed to have no head, that is until I realised that he had two: one on his chest and another on his back. Quills stood out on the limbs of several of them, making them seem like stillborn chicks stretched into the shape of men. Space Marines of a renegade breed lurked at the edges of the chamber. I had no desire to look at them more closely than I had to.

Ichneumon straightened and pointed with his staff. A corridor opened in the press of mortals.

+Come, please, honoured brother and voice of Ahriman.+

I walked the last few steps to the edge of the gunship's assault ramp and moved onto the *Nonogramiton*. The lapis and jade tiles set into the floor shimmered to gold beneath my feet. I tapped the base of my staff on them as I went, and Ichneumon fell in beside me. He stood taller than me, much taller in fact, as though his substance had stretched upwards. Yellow robes hung from his chest. His armour held some of the lines of power armour, but its exact shape and colour altered as the light played over it. The staff in his hand was carved emerald, and a thread of lightning ran up and down its core. A crest of blue hair rose above the faceplate of his helm and ran back to the base of his neck. The aura that clung to him was a rainbow of paradox: anger, joy, despair and pride. He was exactly as I had thought, and everything about him made me wish that this task had not fallen to me.

+Our master wishes one thing from you, Ichneumon,+ I sent, spoken to him alone, as we passed the throng.

+Your master, most honoured voice of Ahriman,+ he replied. I caught an edge in the syrup of his sending. +And we will speak of what he wishes later.+

We walked the rest of the way in inner silence, while behind me I heard the mortals cry out at their lords leaving. The cries were those of wounded birds.

+Why do you not go yourself?+ I had asked Ahriman. +He has come to you after all to give you a blessing, or for some other, equally ridiculous, reason.+

Ahriman nodded, slowly, his face calm in a way that must have been gifted to him as a means to frustrate others.

+You are right. Even though he is our gene-brother, he has become—+
+Vile.+

+That is a strong judgement, even from you.+ His lips twitched, and for an instant I almost thought he had smiled. +But I cannot fault your logic.+

+Then why countenance even his presence amongst the fleet?+

+Everyone has their uses, Ctesias. And have I not already accepted others into my service that are just as—

+Vile?+

+Flawed,+ he continued.

I shrugged to concede the point. I am not a noble soul, and by my deeds I might be accounted as amongst the worst of the adopted children of hell.

+What does he have that you want?+ I asked.

+A way out, Ctesias+

I blinked.

+A way out...+

+Of the Eye of Terror,+ he sent, and then let the thought ring like a struck bell. +I have not gathered forces to my hand just to spend them in needless battle, nor to see them lost trying to breach the Cadian Gate. I have gathered them for a particular war, and a particular purpose, and both of those lie outside of the Eye. We are not embarking on a crusade, Ctesias. We are searching for exodus.+

I began to understand, and closed my eyes. I am no seer, but I could feel the future opening before me with all the comfort of inevitability.

+The Wanderer of Paths?+ I asked.

Ahriman nodded, and I returned the gesture with weariness.

The Eye of Terror is a place of paradox, and those who dwell and war within it are creatures of pride and hollow ambition. Every warrior dreams himself a Warmaster, every demagogue thinks themselves a worthy princeling of Chaos and every witch-sighted fool thinks they alone can master the warp. Though some rise to touch the edge of their dreams, few hold them in their hands, and those that do can often only watch as they drain between their fingers. But all, from aspiring lord of slaughter to doomed master of sorcery shout their pretension with the names and titles.

The honorifics of some champions weigh them down like a prisoner's chains. Even I have names that follow me: The Eater of Shadows, Whisperer of the Ninth Gate, Lord of Nine Thousand Silences, and so on. Most adornments, including my own, hold no meaning. A few though – a rare few – reflect a deeper truth. Such true titles, and the deeds and power they reflect, are terrifying.

The Wanderer of Paths was a title of truth rather than pride, and it belonged to the former Thousand Son who had just sought us out. Few others have travelled as far within the Eye, or know more of its secrets, than Ichneumon. If any knew how to leave it without passing through the Cadian Gate, it would be him. His sudden appearance was worrying. Good fortune is not unknown in the Eye, but here it has meaning.

+You want him to lead us out of the Eye,+ I sent.

+No,+ Ahriman sent, and waited for the frown to twist the wrinkles on my face. +I want him to tell us of a way out. He cannot lead us.+

The frown clung to my face.

+This still does not explain why you are sending *me* to him. You could call him here, and take what you want from him, willing or not. Or would that be distasteful?+

Ahriman remained silent for a long second. I shivered.

+You will go to the *Nonogramiton* bearing my words of greeting to Ichneumon,+ he sent at last. +You will call him brother and afford him every courtesy. He will give to you as a gift knowledge of a way out of the Eye. Then you will destroy him.+

It was my turn to stare and be still.

+Why?+ I said at last.

+Because it is my will, Ctesias,+ Ahriman replied.

+So,+ sent Ichneumon, +Ahriman despatched you rather than come himself. Should I feel slighted, Ctesias?+

+No slight was intended,+ I replied. +You are most welcome, and your presence does us high honour.+

+I am sure that *respect* was all that was intended,+ he sent with amusement.

+Of course,+ I said.

I was wondering where we were going; an audience chamber, I presumed, but I could not be sure. In other circumstances I would have extended my mind to read the space around me, but Ichneumon would have known and that might have affected the delicate charade of courtesy we were both weaving.

We walked on. The bronze carvings covering the passage walls twisted, as though echoing Ichneumons amusement. Silence closed over us the further we walked from the hangar deck. The air had changed too. Incense smoke clung to the ceiling, heavy with notes of cinnamon and burned paper. Carvings of bronze, crystal and bone covered every wall and ceiling. Endless patterns of feathers and the serpentine rune of the Changer of Ways slid in and out of focus on each surface I looked at.

My left hand caught the edge of a bronze wing that projected from the relief on the passage wall, sharp enough to bite into the ceramite.

Nekasu, I hissed to myself.

Several paces behind us, nine warriors in emerald and gold power armour followed, amber pendants and silver chains clacking against ceramite as they moved. They were not Rubricae, but living warriors. Their weapons and armour plates had a sheen of moisture, like sweat-slicked skin, and they moved with a total disunity, their steps and movements never synchronising even for an instant.

+It is kind that you call me brother, Ctesias. It is sometimes pleasant to remember that I once had brothers.+

+It is a fact, Ichneumon. You are still one of us.+

+One of us...?+

+One of the Legion.+

+You lie beautifully, Ctesias. The Changer of Ways sees this in you. Sees, and is pleased.+

I was grateful for my helm. It meant that I did not have to hide my lip curling.

+You...+ I began, but he cut off my platitude before it could form.

+Your pretence, though gratifying in its attempt, is unnecessary. You think me a fool, a credulous simpleton who has given himself over to the veneration of false gods.+

+I never thought you a simpleton.+

+Whether I am or not is irrelevant. The gods are real, Ctesias. You know this. The Changer of Ways watches over us, and holds our fate in his eternal eye. You are his servant as much as I, more perhaps. You hungered for knowledge and power even before the Wolves came to Prospero. He cherishes you for that, guides you in thought and dream, and your successes are the Changer's as much as they are yours. Your choice to deny that fact does not alter the truth of it.+

I bit my mouth closed and clamped my thoughts shut inside my head, wishing very much that Ahriman had sent Kiu, Gaumata or even Astraeos to do this. I tried to think of ways of finessing the exchange, of sliding over the chasm that existed between us. In the end I gave up.

+You are right,+ I sent. +You *are* a simpleton.+

The nine warriors behind us snapped into sudden movement, guns rising, crystal swords sliding into the air.

Ichneumon glanced at them, and they froze. Then he looked slowly back at me. Violet amusement, red rage and black control warred in his aura.

+We were both sent here by the will of others: you by Ahriman, me by the Winds of Change. The difference is that you do not know if you should be here – you only know that it is Ahriman's will, but I know that I must be here. You serve because you must, and I serve because I am a servant of the eternal.+

I tried to give a small nod to indicate a concession, but I could not do even that. It was more ridiculousness than I could bear. You might think that this sentiment was at best hypocrisy and at worst a form of wilful blindness. Perhaps you might be right; after all, the gods are real as well as their daemonic servants. These are facts, of which I am sharply aware, but for all that they exist and – as much as I draw on their power – I refuse to sully myself by offering them devotion that they neither need nor deserve. Those like Ichneumon who devote themselves to

one of the great powers – for he is far from alone – hold a special place in my catalogue of contempt. Perhaps it is because of the gratitude with which they accept the gifts. Perhaps, it is because I do not like to be reminded of the lies I tell myself. Either way I do not like those who exalt in their service to the gods. In that, Ahriman and I agree.

+Whatever the reason, it is... *good* that you came to us,+ I managed at last.

+On the truth of that we can agree,+ he replied as he turned and gestured for me and our escort to follow.

+Truth?+ I sent, and let my amusement touch the sending. +Would your god approve of that word?+

Ichneumon glanced over his shoulder as he walked before me.

+Let us see,+ he sent.

+Behold.+ Ichneumon raised his hands and tilted his head back as though bathing in the fire's warmth – it was hot. My armour warning systems chimed with low-grade heat warnings as I stepped up next to him. +Is it not magnificent?+

+This...+ I began, but the thought trailed away.

+It is the Eye of Change,+ he sent, the thought almost purring, and lowered his hands. +It is the heart of the ship, and the heart of everything I have given to the Master of Fortune. It is *my* heart.+

I remained silent. In honesty I did not know what to say.

The chamber was spherical with a circumference large enough to swallow the central plaza of a major city. Its walls were ribbed metal, and so thickly covered in soot that they seemed moulded out of night. We stood on a walkway that wound around the inside of the walls. Before us, in the central volume of the sphere, a mass of flame coiled and pulsed like a blind dragon. It was a singularity of change and wild power. The warp rolled at its heart, raw, wild and hungry. Sheets of burning parchment tumbled endlessly through the fire, turning to ash and then reforming from nothing. The necks of avian gargoyles projected from the walls of the chamber, breathing torrents of burning gas into the air.

I pulled my helm off, letting the full heat of the fire hit my face.

'Haassuvir...' I breathed aloud.

+What?+ Ichneumon shot me a glance, and his sending was sharp. Just on the edge of my eyes, his bodyguards twitched where they stood. Ichneumon stilled them with a pulse of will. He knew that the sound I had made held no real power, but he did not understand the words I had spoken. He did not like that.

+A expression of surprise, brother,+ I sent,

+Truly? I do not recognise the language.+

+It is a language that died with the civilisation that created it.+

Sweat was prickling my skin. Without my helm the heat was a deluge. I spat, and the saliva was fizzing to steam before its acid began to eat the metal of the platform.

+How did this civilisation die?+

+I destroyed it,+ I sent.

He tilted his head, and I tried not to blink as the sweat ran into my eyes.

+For their language?+ he asked.

+For their impudence.+

He was silent for a second, and then began to laugh. Behind him the mass of fire flared and writhed.

+Is that a threat?+ he sent, the thought rolling with amusement. +Oh, what a beautiful jest!+

+Not a threat,+ I sent.

+I am sure it's not,+ he sent. +But now that we are here, under the Eye of Change, let us talk terms?+

+Terms?+ I sent.

+Yes, Ctesias. Terms for the exchange of what Ahriman needs and what I will receive.+

+Ahriman offers—+

+He wishes to leave the Eye of Terror,+ he cut through me. +And he wishes to do it without braving the Cadian Gate that is now garrisoned by the might of the Imperium.+ I formed a thought in reply, but he raised a finger to halt me. +I know this. The fire and wind gave its truth to me. And I...+ he paused, looking up at the boiling cloud of flame. +I have the means to give Ahriman what he wants.+

The fire twisted and changed colour: blue, purple and green flowed into the red and gold. Clefts opened up, and vortices formed from roaring heat. An image of the Eye of Terror hung above us.

+They call me the Wanderer of Paths,+ he continued, +but I wander only where I am guided, and the paths I walk are gifts from the Great Knower of All. I will give that knowledge to Ahriman as a gift.+ He paused and the image of the Eye collapsed back into a tumble of wild flames. +But I wish a gift in exchange.+

It was my turn to laugh.

+So that is it? For all of your millennia of devotion you are still just a

mercenary like the rest of us.+

He shook his head, and then, slowly, removed his own helm. The head beneath was monstrous. Even in the limited manner of those raised from mankind to the ranks of the Legiones Astartes, it was no longer anything that even mocked its original humanity. Eyes clustered across one half of its front. Circular mouths full of teeth covered the other. Tendrils of soft, pale flesh hung from its scalp like locks of twitching hair. It was an image of abomination, an echo of the curse that we had once followed Ahriman to undo.

+I want to come with you. I want to serve Ahriman,+ sent Ichneumon, the teeth in his mouths twitching. +You see, I am our true face, Ctesias. Under the skin, you are all still like me.+

I did not know what to say. The Rubric had shed the curse of mutation from the Thousand Sons, at least from those of us who lived. But cure is not immunity. The warp is subtle, and though we do not crawl with tentacles and chimeric flesh, there are many amongst the Thousand Sons whose flesh still changes. That is to be expected given what we are, and where we make our home. But Ichneumon's face declared that he was not afflicted with the influence of the warp; he embraced it.

He tilted his head, and his mane of flesh lengthened and coiled together like a knot of worms.

+What say you? Will Ahriman take me into his service? Will he let me be a part of the future he chases?+

I blinked, and breathed out. I honestly did not know what to say, so I asked the question that was ringing in my mind.

+Why would you want that?+

+Does it matter? You want what I have, and this is what I want in return.+

+It does matter because you know that it is a request Ahriman would refuse.+

+Yes, he would.+ Ichneumon pulled his helm back on, the face of horror vanishing beneath gold and carved bone. +He would deny me because of what I believe, while keeping court with creatures like you, and accepting the service of a horde of mongrel warriors. There are some ships amongst this fleet that harbour creatures whose flesh is so blessed with change that it barely holds a single shape from one second to another. I know this, and I know that he would deny me in serving him.+

+Yet you still want to follow him?+

+He is the fulcrum, touched by the Great Sorcerer, watched by the Court of Change. Where he goes the glory of change follows. To be at his side, and aid

his work, is to serve the Grand Conspirator. There are none more high in the champions of change than Ahriman. Only he would deny that, and the paradox of his denial only sweetens its truth.+

+You are insane.+ I shook my head.

+Of course, but who amongst us is not, Ctesias?+

I shook my head. Sweat had started to pour down my skin inside my armour. The heat of the Eye of Change was cutting right through my armour now. My will touched the warp. It was boiling, bubbling with wild currents. I felt my thoughts flood with heat as they hooked power to them.

+No,+ I growled. +I will not accept your terms, and he will not accept your service.+

+Then you will leave without what you came for.+

+I will not,+ I said, sending a hammer of telekinetic force through the air. Ichneumon sensed my attack, and his sphere of force met mine with a blink of blinding light. The Eye of Change flared with plumes of flame above us. The nine bodyguards exploded into movement: blades free and bright, and guns arming. Ichneumon's mind was changing, reshaping the warp faster than I could follow. I felt him pull strength and fire from the Eye of Change. Serpents of white heat blinked into being in the air around me. The first bolt shell roared from the nearest bodyguard's bolter. I was outclassed and outnumbered, and in a fraction of a heartbeat I was going to become a smear of smoke on the air.

I am not a warrior, not in the defined focused way that Astraeos was, or Gaumata is. I am a Space Marine, but I was not facing fragile mortals. Though fool he might be, Ichneumon was powerful. Stars of malice, he was powerful! His mind unfolded into the warp like a flock of vultures, each flutter of wings a thought fused with power. There was no way I should have lived through that instant and survived. I should never have begun such a fight. As I say I am not a pure warrior.

But I had time to prepare.

I spoke the word that had been circling my subconscious. It was not from a dead language, but from the secret encoding of the universe – old before lips first spoke it.

Silence and stillness exploded from me.

Time slid out of focus.

The warp rippled. Ichneumon's blaze of power froze.

The bolt shells crept closer to me.

The Eye of Change was a sculpture of heat. I could not move: the same chains I

had just conjured into being bound my body. My thoughts were free though, and, while the same was true of Ichneumon, he had to react. I did not, and my next thought rose into my mind.

I blinked sidewise in reality. Bile touched my tongue.

Ichneumon's thoughts reshaped. I felt heat bubble in my veins.

The time dilation vanished. Bolt shells exploded where I had been.

Invisible fingers scratched over my flesh inside my armour.

My bolt pistol was in my hand.

The bodyguards were a juddering blur.

I fired three times into the air and deck in front of the charging warriors.

The full weight of Ichneumon's mind slammed into my flesh.

The shells I had fired exploded.

I fell as bubbles of heat raced to my heart and head.

There was a flash of perfect distorted light, and then a shriek.

The force that boiled my blood faltered.

Figures made of pink flame and glowing flesh were ripped into being from where my shells had shattered. Each shell had held a vial of deep blue fluid at its core, held in place by marks carved on the shells' silver jackets. The literal of mind might have called the fluid 'daemon blood', but daemons do not have blood. No matter what you call it, the effect is the same.

I rose as the writhing mass of bounding, hooting creatures unmade the bodyguards. Flames in a dozen colours ate their armour, turning their limbs to glass and ice as it flowed over them.

Ichneumon raised a hand. A jet of white fire leapt from the Eye of Change and cut through bodyguards and daemons like a blade. The line of fire made a sound like ringing glass as it washed back and forth. Then it was gone and Ichneumon was turning back to me, the fingers of his hand smoking.

+Please tell me that there was more to your plan than that?+

I gripped the deck, my gauntleted fingers scoring into the metal. Fatigue beat through me with every hammer blow of my hearts.

Nessutha...

+You can stop babbling to yourself,+ he sent, and his raw will pulled me from the deck like a broken toy in a child's grasp. +You think I did not realise that your muttering was you placing trigger thoughts into your unconscious? Your ways are crude, Ctesias. I am chosen by the Changer of Ways, and in his sight I see that all sorcery is one, no matter the mask it wears.+

I grinned to myself as I hung in midair. I could taste blood between my teeth

and in my throat.

+I was going to cut open your thoughts and take what we needed before you died.+

+And Ahriman thought you would succeed?+

+He was sure of it.+

Ichneumon shook his head.

+He lied, Ctesias. He knew you would try, but it was a test. A test for *me*, to see if I was more than a mage with a...+ he turned his head as though reading the parchments that hung from my armour. +...With a clutch of old tricks and worn secrets.+

+He does not want your service, Ichneumon,+ I hissed in thought.

+No? Ask him. Send your thoughts to him and ask. I will permit it.+

He gestured, and lowered me to the deck. The remains of the bodyguards were a jumble of debris under a slick coat of cooked ectoplasm. I glanced at them and then at Ichneumon, standing like a stretched shadow before the Eye of Change.

+Go on,+ he sent.

I did as he asked. I told Ahriman what had happened, and he replied. I breathed for a long moment afterwards. I was starting to shiver.

+And?+ Ichneumon asked.

+He says yes,+ I replied. +He agrees to your terms.+

Ichneumon nodded as though acknowledging a truth he had long known.

+It is good. I will go to meet with him now—+

+Not yet,+ I sent.

+I will not be— + he began.

+The fleet is readying to depart. Once we have made passage then Ahriman will welcome you into the circle.+

Ichneumon paused, standing still. I could feel his senses stretching out, trying to feel the edges of lies or obscured truths.

+You give me your bond, Ctesias?+ he asked at last. +You pledge the truth of what you speak?+

I disconnected my left gauntlet from my armour. The hand beneath was shrunken and skeletal. I moved it to where a sharp edge of silver rose from my right pauldron. A swift movement and a red line opened across the palm. Blood welled up and ran over my fingers, and I shook it onto the deck.

+With my blood I mark my word, and the words spoken in this place. By my soul, and the powers of the great ocean, I pledge their worth.+

Ichneumon looked at my hand then up at my face.

+Very well,+ he sent.

+And what do you pledge as surety, Wanderer of Paths?+

+ Surety?+

+You have my words and blood. What do you give as sign of our accord?+

He was silent, then he raised his hand. A rope of fire unwound from the Eye of Change, and reached out to his open fingers. He pulled it free, and the flames settled into a ball in his palm. He raised it to the side of his head as though listening.

+The Antilline Abyss is the passage we must use to leave the Eye. Use any other and rivals will destroy us before we see the void beyond.+

+The Antilline Abyss...+ I repeated carefully.

+That is my gift of surety. I will guide you there, but now you know where we must go.+

I made my head bow.

+Thank you, brother,+ I sent.

+It is done?+ asked Ahriman.

I stepped from the gunship to the deck of the *Sycorax* without answering. He was waiting for me, flanked by the silent figures of his Rubricae guards. I avoided looking at any of them.

+We will need to translate the fleet to the warp soon,+ I sent.

+Did you get it?+

+The timing is important. Also I cannot guarantee that he will not detect it. He is more powerful—+

+Ctesias!+ His sending pulled my head up with its intensity. +Is it done?+

‘The Antilline Abyss.’ I said it with my true voice, letting my weariness roll with the words. ‘We have to seek the Antilline Abyss.’

Ahriman nodded slowly. We had a name and that would be enough for us to draw a thread to where we would leave the Eye.

+He gave the name as a gift?+ he asked as I limped down to the deck.

+As you said he would.+

He nodded, and I let him take confirmation that I had attended to my other task from my thoughts.

+Good,+ he sent. +We will translate to the warp within the hour.+

I walked on in silence. I would go to my chamber, take off my armour and sit on my granite throne and do my best not to think anything at all. When the *Sycorax* and the rest of the fleet slid into the warp’s embrace I would be silent

and alone – not thinking about what would be happening to the *Nonogramiton*.

I am not a warrior. I have said this, but what I am is a caller of daemons. I wield their power in place of my own. I could tell Ichneumon had noticed my whispering phrases as I passed through his ship. That is why I had needed the display of inadequate psychic violence, so that he would have a reason for my muttering. If he believed he had the truth, he would think no further. Truly, power can blind us all.

Each string of the muttered whispers was a component of a greater whole, each innocuous on their own, but together created something far more subtle and far more dangerous than Ichneumon could conceive. I had marked and bound each phrase into the skin of his ship: tapping scratches into the deck with my staff, marking it with my acidic spit, clawing it into the platform as I rose from my defeat and marking it with my blood. Dangerous, dark work; just the kind of thing you would send a creature like me to do.

I reached my chamber and stripped off my armour. Taking my chair, I settled my back against the black stone. It felt cool on my skin. Far off, the *Sycorax*'s engines woke and sent their low vibration through the air. All across the fleet the same low note of tension would be running through the flesh and bones of the living.

As I waited, the image of Ichneumon's mutated face came back to me, lit by the light of the Eye of Change.

+We were both sent here by the will of others, + he had said.

I thought of the god he worshiped and gave his mind and soul to, and I wondered if Ichneumon had been sent here to give us what we needed and then die believing he had won.

+The Changer of Ways watches over us and holds the fate of us in his eternal eye. You are his servant as much as I. More perhaps. +

Those words still live with me now, long after Ichneumon went to the abyss. Even now I cannot help but wonder if he was right.

As the dreamless dark closed over me, I heard laughter in the night

Ichneumon would be contemplating the glory of his god as his ship began its last journey. It would not be long now. The *Nonogramiton* would go into the warp, and then the phrases threaded through it would do what they had been crafted to do – they would call out, the daemons of many gods would come, the ship's protections would crumble and then it would cease to be. None would ever know what happened. I alone would know of the agreement with Ichneumon and Ahriman's violation of its terms. Me... and the warp, its powers

silent in their mirth. It would be a pure, and perfect, murder.



III

HOUNDS OF WRATH

*'Do not ask which creature screams in the night.
Do not question who waits for you in the shadow.
It is my cry that wakes you in the night,
And my body that crouches in the shadow.'*

– Karazantor the Vile, the Traitor of Xian

Know this, the daemon is a lie.

The daemon claims supreme dominion. They claim that in time all will be their slaves, that reality will lie broken, and that they shall rule the realm of mortals for eternity. They say that it is destiny. They say, in the paradox time of the warp, that this has already happened. These claims, like every part of their nature, are false.

The daemon's existence is a dream. Its power is the stolen strength of mortal minds. Its shape is an image painted onto existence so that we may look on them and know that our sins have returned for us. Though they have power it is a power which eats itself. The high daemons, which some call gods, squabble of souls and dominion, betraying each other and themselves. They are not predators. They are carrion.

Yet, for all its falsity, the daemon has the ability to twist the mind of the living, to make flesh a mockery, to defy death, and bring ruin on the works of mortals. When the warp waxes, and the neverborn walk through the veil, they have the

strength to break armies and cast down heroes. They are always there, watching from the edge of thought, and the corner of sight.

The daemon is a lie, but it is a lie that can unmake reality.

I say this because I have made my life in the calling and controlling of these creatures. I am Ctesias, and I above all know the price for believing in the power of the gods and their children.

Arrogance is the mark of the sorcerer, and those of the Thousand Sons more than any. We make the mistake of thinking that because we are not slaves that we cannot be prey. This is a tale of how I made that mistake, and the price that I paid.

The *Fall of Ignorance* spun in the fires of its death. Its hull had split from prow to beneath the bridge. Its stern hung from broken bones of girder. Standing upon the bridge, I watched as a splinter of iron and stone the size of a hab-stack tumbled slowly through the void.

+Geller field failure.+

I looked up. Astraeos knelt on the deck

I shook my head and looked away without replying. The bridge was a cave of twisted metal open to the vacuum. Spheres of machine oil and blood drifted past me. Corpses, or rather parts of corpses, spun in lazy arcs. Portions of servitors hung from tangles of tubes and cables, still tethered to their systems. My eyes found pieces of power armour amongst the debris: a silver gauntlet set with a spiral of blue stones, a peg of severed bone projecting from within.

I sniffed. Inside my helm I could taste burnt meat and bitter ash

+No,+ I sent. +It was not the Geller field.+

I reached out with my staff and sent a severed hand spinning with a gentle tap. Its fingers twitched at the psy-active contact.

+You seem very sure,+ sent Sanakht. He was standing on a crumpled wall section above me, feet mag-clamped to the metal. The swordsman looked bored, his hands resting on the pommels of his paired blades. He was ready, but this was a place of the dead and there was nothing to threaten him.

+Seeming does not come into it,+ I replied. +I am sure.+

+The neverborn were here.+ Astraeos stood, his fingers dark with half frozen blood from the deck.

+A crushingly obvious fact,+ I sent, and I could not keep the weariness from my words. I closed my eyes for an instant. They stung with tiredness.

We had translated from the warp only four hours before, and the passage

preceding it had not been kind. We had passed outwards from the central volume of the Eye of Terror. Storms had battered our fleet and minds.

I took a long slow breath inside my helm and felt my hand twitch with the instinct to pinch my forehead with my fingers. Bright motes of red light were dancing on the edge of my sight.

+There were neverborn here,+ I sent, +but that does not mean that the Geller field failed.+

+Then what did happen?+ sent Sanakht, his thought voice not hiding his impatience with both Astraeos and myself. I bit back a retort, and instead gave the most accurate reply I could.

+Something else,+ I sent.

+What?+ Astraeos asked, his eyes fixed on me, contempt bleeding off his aura in grey coils.

+I am...+ I began, then paused. The *Fall of Ignorance* had arrived an hour after the rest of the fleet, cast back into reality, still burning, the echoes of its death trailing after it in tatters of red warp skin. That in itself was a puzzle, a worrying puzzle. How had the daemons got within the ship if the Geller field had not failed?

+I am not certain,+ I finished.

Sanakht gave a cough of laughter across the vox. I was about to reply when another voice filled our minds.

+He is right.+

We all turned as one as Ahriman entered. He did not walk, but floated, guiding himself with threads of telekinetic force. Wreckage spun past him, sometimes so close that I was certain it would hit him, but it did not, and he did not change his speed or direction. A film of ice sparked on the high horns of his helm, and in the weave of his silk robes. A squad of Rubricae followed him, their feet locked to the deck as they marched in dull unity. He stopped in front of us, and we bowed our heads. The ache in my skull was still bright.

+Ctesias is right,+ sent Ahriman. +The shields did not fail. When the crew died they were fleeing from something that came from within. Their doom was with them when they passed into the aether.+

+The damage...+ began Astraeos.

+One of the command crew overloaded the plasma couplings. Courage, or madness, it cannot be known.+ Ahriman paused, pivoting in the space above the burnt and twisted deck. +I can hear the screams still – they cling to the hull. But it is a storm without order, only the colour and texture of terror. And amongst

it...+

His sending trailed away, and that hesitation sent ice across my skin.

+Master?+ sent Sanakht into the empty moment.

Ahriman shook his head, and turned his gaze on me.

+Discover what happened here, Ctesias. We make passage to Samatis in two cycles. You have until then.+

A protest began in my thoughts, but it died before forming fully. I could feel the skin of my face prickle inside my helm as Ahriman's gaze held steady on me. I knew without testing the feeling that this was not a command I could refuse. Of his Circle, I was the one who knew most of the ways of daemons. I was most suited to getting him an answer. Our kind does not like mysteries; they damage our pretensions of infallibility.

+As you will it,+ I replied, bowing my head.

Ahriman nodded and gestured to Sanakht.

+Sanakht will watch over you, and keep you alive should there be need.+

I could tell from the swordsman's posture and silence that he had already received the command from Ahriman by thought, and liked it less than I did. I nodded at him, once. He turned away.

+Two cycles, Ctesias,+ sent Ahriman, as he floated towards a ragged hole in the bridge wall. The firefly lights of circling gunships moved against the night beyond. I saw one craft change course and begin to close on our position. +Two cycles and then you will have an answer to what happened here.+

I worked through a sunless cycle of day and night. Sanakht watched over me, his half broken soul filling the edge of my senses with itches of impatience. I moved through the dead ship brushing its every wall and rivet with my mind.

Emotions are the currents of the warp. Strong emotions send ripples through it, and leave a mark on the place they occurred. Most marks are shallow, and fade quickly. The strongest emotions leave more permanent impressions. The *Fall of Ignorance* was a tattered wound, a confusing blur of impressions, so thick that it took hours to tease out shadows of what had happened on board.

Ahriman was right, of course; the ship had died within the warp, and its Geller field had not failed. The daemons that had destroyed it had come from within, and its explosive death had come at the hands of its own, panicked crew. But amongst the wash of terror and the dark splashes of death, there was something else.

The *Fall of Ignorance* had been the ship of a warband ruled by a priesthood of

psykers, who worshipped a selection of poorly chosen daemons and aspects of the Changer of Ways. Like many of the warbands that had been drawn to serve Amon and had then transferred their loyalty to Ahriman, they were not Thousand Sons, but opportunist and mercenaries drawn to power and the possibility of more of it.

Rather like myself, in fact.

Even their most potent sorcerers were weaklings and children compared to Ahriman and the rest of the Circle, but their powers were still considerable. And in all the churned mess of death, fear, rage and desperation I could find no trace of their arts. The wounds left by conjured lightning and the imprint of infernal fire were absent. They had died without raising their most potent weapon in their defence.

That worried me.

I kept moving, trying not to linger on possibilities.

A pattern emerged as I walked and floated through the wreckage. At first it was faint, but the deeper Sanakht and I went the clearer it became. The destruction and terror on the ship radiated from a single central point, like the blast imprint of a bomb detonation. At the centre of the pattern was a corridor. A bare strip of walls, floor and ceiling in an area of the ship which had been inhabited by higher orders of human crew: skilled serfs, favoured attendants, and thralls. It looked like nothing, just an empty corridor, with sticky splatters of blood adhered to the walls. It was the start though, the central point, and if I was to give Ahriman answers then it was the place I needed to truly begin my work. There I would call back the past to witness for us.

I breathed out the last word of my conjuration, and it formed a glowing cloud in the airless void. The cloud solidified, squirming over itself like a snake. I watched it. Static fizzed across my helmet display. My inner eye saw it grow, the coils of light thickening until it was a fat knot in the dark. I could see other shapes within it now, hands and faces stretched into ropes of grainy light.

+Do you take pride in what you have become?+ Sanakht asked as he watched me.

‘Pride?’ I replied in my mundane voice. ‘A strange question to ask.’

+A fair one, given what you are.+ His sending nudged my thoughts. The conjured image before me flickered. Angry black cracks formed across its edges.

‘Please stop that. I realise that your capacities are even more limited than they were, but this is both delicate and difficult, and prone to unpleasant results if it goes wrong.’

I spoke a string of silent sounds, and the shadows in the corridor flickered and thinned.

‘Given what I am...’ I repeated his words carefully, aware that I should just ignore him, but let my annoyance override prudence. ‘I take it you know what I am then?’

‘You are an agent of your own desires – a creature without honour, who has sold himself over and over again. A failure.’

‘Failure?’

‘You have bartered away all that you had for petty power. Nothing exists in your universe that you would not sell to take another breath. You are the greatest of failures. You are a shell where a warrior once stood.’

‘Strong words, *brother*.’ I let the last word slide from my lips like a slug. ‘You are of course a warrior of ideals, without weakness or failing. I can see that in those you gave your loyalty. Tell me, did Magnus lack something greater and more worthy? Was that why you decided to defy him? Were Ahriman’s high motives so fleeting in your soul that, when Amon came and offered a future of oblivion, you took to it without pause? And when he fell to Ahriman, did the new dream take the place of the old before or after Amon’s corpse hit the floor?’

His swords were a blur in his hands before I realised he had drawn them. I pulled a fragment of my will away from the construct, and slammed it into him. It was not much, but it was enough to rock him backwards for an instant. The sphere of energy bulged and flickered. Frost flicked up the walls, and I felt sores open on my skin as I fought to keep my mind aligned.

‘Careful,’ I said, softly. ‘Remember, this is not something either of us wants to be close to if my concentration slips.’ He looked at me, the edges of his swords sparking in the pale light. He shook his head, and sheathed the blades. To be honest I do not think he intended to kill me. If he had, then this tale might have been very different in the telling.

‘Am I proud? That was the question wasn’t it?’ I asked. The psych-construct before me rippled. ‘Proud of my skill? Proud that, against the odds, I still survive while living in the underworld of a universe that is populated only with enemies?’

I turned my head towards him, and the knot of pale light unravelled. Tendrils of ghost energy whipped through the dark and struck the walls, floor and ceiling. Growths of shape and shadow spread outwards, churning with blurred shape and movement. Whispers and broken voices began to babble in my ears. Sanakht flinched as the backwash from the manifestation hit his mind.

I smiled.

‘Proud? Yes, I suppose I am.’

He turned to reply, but then the past filled the corridor before us, and stole what he was going to say from his tongue.

A human made of shredded light rose from the dark. The ghosts of robes and limbs blurred at his edges. The vision was not real, of course. It was an imprint left by what had happened here, pulled from the warp and cast into being like an image projected onto a wall. I could see a face, but it was not the face that he had worn in life. Pit-black eyes bulged above a billowing slit of a mouth. It was the face of his soul. The face of a human psyker, not powerful, but one of those kept by some of Ahriman’s followers as thralls. And he was running for his life.

I watched as he turned and looked behind him, the image exploding in splinters of light as his mind shattered with fear. I heard the ghost of his scream, faint and distant, as though it was coming from far away. I looked behind us, at where he had looked.

In that moment, just as the image of a dead man looked behind him, I saw a shadow blot out the darkness.

And I heard a howl.

+What was that?+ sent Sanakht. The ghost images were draining away into the airless dark. I was shivering, my fingers rattling inside my gauntlets. Cold danced on my spine. +Ctesias, did you hear that?+ In my head the sound of the howl rose again and again. +Ctesias?+

I was breathing hard, the blood a rising drum beat in my skull. Sanakht’s swords were drawn and he was turning his head as though trying to catch a sound.

+I hear wolves,+ he sent.

+No.+

I reached for the bolt pistol at my waist. I carry it because I have always carried it, but I seldom use it. My mind is the only weapon I need. Ice was still coiling my spine. It had all become very clear just what had happened to the *Fall of Ignorance* and, as ever, the truth once known is never comforting.

+Not wolves, brother,+ I sent. +That was the call of a hound.+

And, as I sent the word, two eyes opened in the dark-like holes cut into a furnace, and the hound howled as it bounded into reality.

Everything in the universe is balance, or so Magnus once said. For every sorrow there is a joy. For every light a darkness. And for everything that clings to life

there is a predator. It is the oldest of balances and the oldest source of fears. The growl from the dark beyond the firelight, the ring of teeth rising silent from dark water, the wings of the raptor circling against the sky. We of the Thousand Sons imagine ourselves transcendent amongst mortals, our powers akin to those of gods. So they are: our arrogance is not unfounded, but we are not separate from the herd of mortality. There are creatures that hunt us, ever hungering for our souls. Of these, the hounds of the Lord of Skulls are perhaps to be most feared.

The hound formed as it leapt. Its head was a cave of flame, its teeth the tips of broken swords. Blood-caked fur and molten scales skinned its red muscle. Its presence filled the passage with the reek of hacked meat and hot iron.

Sanakht reacted before I could form a thought. His swords lit as he cut, bright streaks of lightning and fire. I saw the blows hit, saw the power and beauty as his force sword stabbed into the hound's muzzle, and the perfect timing as the power sword's edge opened its flank. I saw the hound land, molten-brass blood spreading in spheres in the dark as it crumpled. Except it did not happen.

The tip of the force sword rammed forward, and the fire in the cutting edge guttered like a blown candle. The power flowing through the blade vanished. The hound dipped its head in midair, and met the dead metal tip with its forehead. The blow sheered into empty air. I could smell burning sugar and meat. A collar of barbed brass circled its neck, glowing with forge heat and hatred. I saw it and wanted to scream. The warp was draining into it, fleeing my mind and leaving me naked before the hungering void. The hound was a hole in my mind's eye, a stretched shape of shadow.

Iron claws shrieked on plasteel as the hound pounced. Sanakht spun to turn the momentum of his blows back, but his feet were mag-locked to the floor, his movement slowed. The hound arched its head back. Sanakht flinched back as its jaws snapped shut where his neck had been. He released the mag-clamps in his feet and spun into the space above.

I fired my bolt pistol. The hound leapt up the wall, claws gouging into metal plates as it shed the pretensions of gravity. My bolt shells exploded in its wake. Sanakht's feet hit the ceiling, and clamped to the plating. The hound bounded off the wall, muscle flowing like pistons. Sanakht twisted and slammed the dead metal of his force sword into its muzzle. The blow twitched the head aside, and the jaws snapped shut a hair's span from Sanakht's face. If it had been anyone else, I would have thought it a second lucky escape, but while Sanakht was many things, I would never deny that with a sword he was closer to divinity than mortal.

He rammed his power sword up under the hound's jaw. The lightning sheathed blade exploded through bone and muscle. The hound's body scabbled at the air, claws skittering off the ceiling plates. Sanakht ripped the sword down, back through the head and out of its muzzle. The collar around the hound's neck flashed blue with heat and shattered globules of flesh and liquid brass exploded outwards. Sanakht flinched back, disconnected his feet from the ceiling plates and pushed off.

I heard another howl and had time to turn as a second hound slid from the shadows. I fired. The round hit its shoulder, and ripped a crater in its bulk. Splinters of crimson scale exploded into the vacuum and hissed to ectoplasm. I squeezed the trigger again, just as the hound hit me.

The lack of gravity saved me. If I had fallen, the last thing I would have felt in life... was...

The hound's paws and chest slammed into me, its mouth yawning wide to bite down on my head. I pitched backwards, and my boots unclamped from the floor. The hound's jaws closed. A single tooth caught my forearm and slit the armour open like skin. I tumbled down the corridor. Beads of blood scattered after me. Bright, white pain exploded in my skull. Blackness was seeping into me as blood poured out. The warp fled into the distance. Ceiling, walls and floor hammered me as I tumbled over and over, still clutching my staff and pistol.

I could hear the hound bounding after me, its claws ripping metal as it sprung down the corridor. Its hunger filled my mind and I knew that it would never stop, that it would drag my soul back to the blood-soaked dark beneath the Throne of Skulls. It was inevitable. It had been ordained. I raised my pistol, targeting spinning runes as my world turned over and over.

A sword blade hacked down into the back of the creature's neck. The power field activated just before the edge met flesh. Scales, flesh and bone sprayed out, as the blade cut down and down.

My back hit the wall. I punched my hand into the metal and jerked to a stop. Sanakht was tumbling beside the daemon, pushing his blade deeper into the hounds lower neck. I raised my pistol and fired. Three bolts ripped the creatures head free and blew it into splinters and froth.

I let out a breath as my thoughts and the warp reconnected. That, more than still being alive, was a sublime relief.

Sanakht struck the wall next to me and gripped onto it.

+Are you injured?+ he asked.

+Your concern is refreshingly unexpected,+ I managed. Blood was still

pumping from the slit in my arm. +I am functioning.+

+Can you move?+

By way of reply, I kicked off the wall and shot down the corridor. We had to reach our gunship. We had to get back to the *Sycorax*. My mind reached out, trying to find Ahriman, trying to speak to him, but the only answer was the fading cries of the dead. Sanakht followed, kicking off walls and gantries in the spinning silence

+This was not a random attack.+ I sent as we hurtled through the dark. +They were waiting for us. This was their message. The hounds have been loosed to hunt us, to hunt *him*.+

It was one of the moments of my life where my capacity for something approaching loyalty surprised me. I should have known better. I should not have been so naive.

+Which power unleashed them?+

It was a good question, and I should have seen that it was the only question which really mattered. Hindsight makes us all seem fools.

+Pick one,+ I spat back.

On the edge of my mind I could hear more howls rising from the distant night.

Ahriman was waiting as we jumped the gunship. I had managed to connect to his mind only minutes before we docked, blurting out a warning as my body fought to staunch the blood flowing from my wound. Sanakht had his swords drawn and lit as we hit the floor. Blood scattered from me as I rose from where I landed. My eyes took in the rings of Rubricae covering the hangar deck. Astraeos and the rest of the Circle stood beside Ahriman, helmed and armoured.

Surprise spilled through me. It was so calm. So still. No blood. No howl of hounds. Bright stablights reflecting on azure armour. I felt myself sway.

It was wrong.

Or was it *I* that was wrong?

+Ctesias,+ sent Ahriman, stepping forward.

The hounds were coming. I had heard their cries. They had tasted my blood, and I knew that they were coming with total certainty.

+Ctesias?+

I heard the thought, but it was distant. I blinked and tried to form a sending, tried to open my mouth. But nothing happened.

The world was cracking. Smears of red marked the light touching my eyes. I felt one of my legs slide out from beneath me and the deck met me as I fell to

my knees.

Red. Everything was calm, but all I could see was red: the red of thick blood rippling in a pool, the red of a sun hidden by the smoke of a burning world and the red of a sword pulled from the forge. The world was drowning in crimson and I was drowning with it.

And then a portion of my stupidity fell from my mind. I should have known. Of Ahriman's entire Circle I should have known, and seen, and not been so blind. I am, it seems, not immune to my own form of hubris.

I tried to rise, but I could not.

I felt hands touch me, and try to pull me up.

I forced my mouth open.

'They...' I began, and felt thoughts try to reach my own, but my mind was a blur of sharp edges and heat. 'They are coming,' I rasped. My breaths were coming fast. The air in my lungs was smoke and cinders.

'We are ready for them,' said Astraeos.

'They need a scent,' I said, and with each word I heard the patter of my blood on the deck. I think they understood then, because I felt them draw back, and heard the sound of weapons crackling to life.

The hound had not failed in its purpose. It had maimed me, and tasted my blood so that it could have my scent.

So that they could follow me from beyond the veil.

The howl rose within my mind. First one, then a second, then more than I could count. I could feel fire in my blood. The whirl of crimson was all around me, a wall of blood fog and black smoke, and I knew that my long and pitiful life was at an end.

But I knew that I was not going to meet my end on my knees.

I stood and forced my eyes open.

For a second everything was as it had been. Ahriman, Astraeos, Sanakht – the ranks of Rubricae – all facing me with weapons drawn. Then, with a last howl in my skull, the hounds fell upon us.

They bounded from the edge of sight. Crimson bodies flickered into being. Lightning formed around Astraeos, lashed out towards the forming shapes, and vanished before it fell. Light stuttered and ripped into shreds of black and glowing red. I saw a hound, the first to take full flesh, leap into the air as the Rubricae fired as one. The bolts exploded in midair, the blue and pink fire within flashing out and collapsing in an eye blink. The hound landed amongst the Rubricae, its jaws locking around the chest of one and tossing it into the ranks

behind. Dust fell from the pierced armour. I could hear high, dry screaming in the warp.

Sanakht was running to Ahriman's side, his swords a blur. More hounds bounded into sight. I heard the stutter of bolt-rounds, and the splash of explosions. The Rubricae began to jerk to stillness as the presence of the hounds severed them from the power animating their armour. Voices called across the vox. I saw Astraeos battering down a creature with the pommel of his lifeless force sword. Ahriman was calling to us as he wove amongst the devastation, firing with each step.

'Ctesias!' he called, and my head turned. A hound cleared the immobile line of Rubricae, and loped towards me, muscles bunching to pounce. I pulled the pistol from my thigh. My fingers were wet with my own blood. Blazing orange eyes fixed upon me – they were already too close, and my hand was still rising.

A figure in blue armour cannoned into the hound from the side, pitching into it with raw physical power. The hound landed, its claws raking the deck for purchase. Then Astraeos straightened and fired, his bolt pistol breathing rounds into the creature as he walked towards it. The hound came apart in spills of red smoke and jellied flesh.

He turned. Hissing blood coated his armour and robe.

'Thank you,' I managed.

He turned away, already firing. Blurred shapes, cries and the roar of weapons rolled like a storm through the air. I looked for a target, but my limbs were moving as though I was wading through water. Blood fell from my arm. It fizzed with fire as it fell through the air.

The one possibility that I had overlooked came to me then, and I cursed myself that I had not seen it sooner.

I focused my mind and turned it within, reaching down into the base beat of life within my veins. I felt the blood pouring through me, and the dual beat of my hearts became the roar and clash of battle. Like all daemons the hounds were of the warp, even if their brass collars and the blessing of their lord made them immune to our powers. The warp is their existence, and at that moment their existence in reality hung by the thread of blood they had followed. My blood.

They felt it as my mind began to reform. They howled and turned towards me. I was fighting to stand. I saw Sanakht cut the legs from one as it turned from him and bounded towards me. Formulae were unfolding in my mind, multiplying as my will gave them life.

The hounds were steaming towards me, closing with flickering bounds. Frost

covered the deck beneath their feet, and their blood spun into the air as smoke. Gunfire and blades cut into the pack, and some fell or blew apart. They did not stop or turn aside. They knew what I intended, and they would bring me down before I could complete my plan.

The formulae of banishment are old, their secrets known for millennia and forgotten many times. Their preparation should be done with care, their use controlled with every precaution. But I did not have time, and I did not have the strength for caution. I unleashed my thoughts and let them pour across the blood bond.

The hounds screamed but their howls died in their throats. Their bodies began to burn. Flakes of ash peeled from them. Their scales cracked. The fire in their eyes blazed. They were choking in reality, and mine was the hand on their throat.

Ahriman, Astraeos and the others began to fire. Bolt-rounds struck crumbling flesh, and blew it into grey clouds. For a second I thought I had succeeded, that I would survive.

A hound leapt over the powdering form of its pack mates and landed before me. Molten brass bled from its flanks and the edges of its shape were a haze of cinders and ashes. The last segment of the formulae completed in my mind, and I felt the warp buckle as it reached in to reality to yank the hound back into its own realm.

The hound's mouth opened. Its teeth were black slits in the world. I could hear shouts and the stuttering boom of gunfire. The hound's body broke apart as surged towards me. The sound of its howl swallowed my mind.

Its jaws closed on my neck.

Silence rushed up to meet me as the clamour and colour of life vanished, and then I died for the first time.



IV THE FIRST PRINCE

'There is power enough in man to overturn all creation, were not for the shackles of pride holding our souls.'

– Fatidicus, founder saint of the Temple of the Saviour Emperor

The light is fading. My eyes which have seen so much, struggle to see these words as I write them. It will not be long now until I die for the second, and final time. My soul will go to the reward that a life of wielding forbidden knowledge has earned me.

I say that it will be my second death, and that is true, after a fashion, for in the three thousandth and eighty-first year of my life I died for the first time. It was not the end, though. After all, here I am.

My name is Ctesias, once of the Thousand Sons, and this is a story of lies and deceit, and of why I lived through one death to die again. I was not this tale's creator. That dubious honour falls to my then-master Ahriman. This is his story, though I was its witness.

And it begins as razor teeth ripped my throat open, and I fell, screaming, from reality...

Death is silence. The place between here and there, between the noisy beating of heart and blood and the hush of eternity. Blank blackness surrounded me, total and complete. All I could feel was wind and the touch of dry dust. I could not

feel my body: not my face, not the weight of my muscles, or the ache of the bones in my hands. And I could not remember who I was, or how I came to be there.

‘Greetings, Ctesias.’ The voice was so sudden that it did not seem real. ‘Here we are at last, old friend.’

I did not know the it, though I knew that I should. I tried to open my mouth to ask the speaker who they were. Nothing happened.

‘Do not speak, Ctesias,’ said the voice. ‘You have no tongue for it. Not here. Here you are nothing but a silent name.’ I did not know what the voice meant, but I knew it was right. I felt its truth like the cold edge of a knife on my skin. ‘You know where you are, do you not?’

I remember then. The memory came slowly, pouring into me, wet and sharp. My body was lying on a metal deck, on a ship called the *Sycorax*. Blood was spreading in a slowly clotting pool around my broken limbs. I was not breathing, and both of my hearts had just drummed their last beats.

‘Yes, that is right. You are dying. You are on the threshold of the gate of souls. All of those centuries crawling away from it, and here it is, open beneath you, waiting for you.’

The rest of my past came, all the broken and bloody details of a life lived too long. I remembered that I was born a man, and raised to become a demi-god in a time when men no longer believed in them. I remembered that I had been a warrior and a scholar who had become a peddler of atrocity. I remembered that the last moments before I began to die were filled with the howl of hounds, and the reek of burning blood.

‘I would ask if you saw it coming, said the voice, but you were never a soothsayer, were you, my friend? No, that art was never to your taste.’

Ice folded through me. I knew who was speaking to me as well, and why, and as soon as I knew I wished I did not.

‘I am here for the debt that lies between us, Ctesias. I am here by the power of the bindings you laid on yourself. I am here for the last thing that is yours to give.’ It chuckled, the sound a dry rustle of cracked skin. ‘Forgive the formalities, you understand. You always knew the power and importance of words. I always admired that, a mortal who could make such chains of words and names that he could not move for the clinking of pacts and bargains. Clink-clink, clink-clink...’

I could hear it smiling as it spoke, lips pulling back over sharp teeth, tongue

sliding over the points. I could not see its face, but I did not need to. Some things are best known but not seen.

‘I am sorry, Ctesias, it purred. I will miss you... I will miss watching you.’ Something touched me then. The sensation of flesh and skin formed around the claws as they dug into my soul. ‘I would ask if you wished to live again, but I am afraid that you do not have anything left to bargain with. At least you had *this* time. A small thing, but all I can give.’

The claws began to cut deeper.

‘Leave him!’ A new voice echoed in the blind void. I felt heat and for an instant the blackness was smudged by white light. I knew the voice, but it was impossible that *he* was there. It was impossible that he would come for me now. I tried to call out, to warn him, but the silence still held me. ‘You will go from this place, daemon, and send my brother back to the living.’

‘A mortal shade, oh what a delight. Should I quiver with terror now, or would that not be appropriate?’

‘I make this offer once. Go now.’

‘And who are you to make such an offer?’

‘My name is Ahzek Ahriman.’

The daemon snorted.

‘Of course, the beggar thief of secrets. This creature you call a brother lies in my debt, his bond pledged in willing exchange. I am here for what is mine, sorcerer, and you do not have the power to prevent that.’

The darkness vanished. Thunder split the world. Pain became me, and I screamed in silence as the lightning lashed on. I could hear Ahriman’s voice resonating as it cast words into the storm, and the daemon hissed and roared.

Then the storm was gone. The darkness returned, and with it the daemon’s voice.

‘Impressively foolish.’ It did not sound angry. It sounded like it was enjoying itself. ‘The Court of Change cackles in appreciation of your subtlety, Ahriman. The Plague Children fear the fire of your power. Even the dogs of the Skull Throne curb at the sound of your name. Yet you do not realise that that I have unrivalled power in this place. I am disappointed.’

‘What are you?’ growled Ahriman.

‘A good question. The simplest questions are so often the best and the last asked, do you not find? I am the heir to the warp. I am the death of kings. I am the first son of the gods.’

‘An impressive collection of words.’

‘You should know that words are never just words.

‘You are a creature of the warp, nothing more. Even with power you are the slave of false gods.’

‘I am not theirs.’ The daemon’s voice was a whip crack of anger.

‘Yet here you are, a princeling coming to pick a soul from a carcass like carrion.’

‘I am not here for his soul. What use have I for rags? No, I am here for something greater.’

The daemon’s words hung in the empty wind, like a baited hook in water.

‘What?’ asked Ahriman.

‘That is a secret I will not speak, and Ctesias... cannot speak to tell you. But...’ I felt the tip of a claw brush me again, and again the fire of pain burned bright. The daemon sounded disinterested, almost bored. ‘But I will offer you something else. You care for Ctesias, a broken, vile thing though he is. You want to see him live, and I will see that done, and withhold my hand from collecting what is mine. I will do this for you... but such things are not gifts that can be given without an exchange.’

‘What is the price?’

‘A pact, your bond for his. Take his place in my debt and you can have him... what remains of him.

‘I will not accept that.’

‘In that case I shall be about my business.’

The claw touched me again. The feeling of muscles and flesh flashed into existence an instant before the razor tips plunged into me. I screamed. In the physical world I can endure pain that would kill mere humans. But there, in the gap between substance and emptiness, I was just the mind of an old man. So I screamed, and screamed, but made no sound.

‘Hold!’ called Ahriman

The claw withdrew. Cold numbness flooded me.

‘Control is made of knowing what we have, and what we want,’ said the daemon, and I felt an echo of its satisfaction shiver through me. ‘Power is having something that someone else wants and cannot have.’

I tried to force a voice into being. Ahriman did not know what he was facing. I have never seen the like of *his* power, but the daemon who had come for me was of another order –older and more terrible than any being beneath the Dark Gods themselves.

‘You cannot destroy me,’ said the daemon. ‘Such a thing is beyond you. So do

not try and pretend that it is within your power.’

‘Your coin is false, daemon,’ sneered Ahriman. ‘Its glitter no more than the shine of lies believed by fools.’

‘Know the value of a thing before you refuse it. I can offer you much, Ahriman. Kings have burned their heirs and offered up their realms for a fraction of what might be yours.’ I felt the daemon’s presence move away from me, as though it coiled closer to Ahriman as it spoke. ‘I know you, Ahriman. I have glimpsed your deeds, and heard great Lords of Change speak of what you yet may be. Others have made offers to you. The greatest servants of my four sires have courted you, and failed. But they did not hold what you feared to lose, and they could not offer you what you truly desire. Only I can do that.’

‘Lies.’

‘Truth. Something won by lies is worthless. I will give you only truth. If you refuse then I will take my due from Ctesias, and go. You may leave without harm or loss.’ The daemon paused, its voice sliding into sweat, poisonous, honey. ‘Come Ahriman. Do you not wish to know what I can offer?’

I wanted to shout into the silence that followed the daemon’s words. I wanted to warn Ahriman. To tell him to leave me to the fate I had made for myself. I waited for him to refuse the daemon, to go. But the moments lengthened, and I felt the daemon smile.

‘Show me,’ said Ahriman, and in my blind mind I imagined the daemon bowing its head in obedience.

‘As you wish.’

Dry wind swirled and rattled around me. Stains of rust-red and orange spread through the darkness. The colours grew, split, and cleaved along hard lines, until a great flat pattern of wild colour and shape had swallowed the black.

‘They say all things begin with song, or light, or blood. All incorrect, even as metaphors,’ said the daemon, but its voice came from behind me, as though it stood just behind me. ‘Everything begins not with a spark, or blast of trumpets. It begins with chance.’

And, as the daemon spoke, the flat image before me grew into three dimensions. Planes of jagged ochre and brown grew to mountains. Pools of blue and swirls of white unfolded into a sky scuffed by clouds. Knots of black lines and fragments of bone became towers and paved avenues flanked by stone-faced buildings. Green blots grew into trees in full leaf, and threads of muddied colour settled into rivers flowing from the mountains and through the city.

‘I do not know this place,’ said Ahriman.

‘No,’ purred the daemon. ‘Though it is familiar, is it not? I could have chosen a small observatory on the birth worlds of the eldar, or the first necropolis of the necrontyr. It does not really matter where it is, only what happens here. This is a city which ruled a small piece of a world. From those towers its kings looked out and dared to think they ruled all that could be ruled, while beside them their priests looked to the heavens and dreamed that they knew all that could be known.’

‘If you are trying to point out my own hubris, the parallel is clumsy.’

‘Nothing like that,’ said the daemon with a chuckle. ‘This does not represent hubris, Ahriman. Those figures which you can see moving in the streets, all clad in blue, red, and gold, they don’t feel pride in their delusion. Their domination of the world is simply a fact to them. No one takes pride in facts. No, the people of this city have something else. Would you like to look closer? If you look into their eyes you might see it.’

Ahriman must have nodded, for the city grew closer. The people, who had seemed so small, grew. Smudges of colour became robes of billowing fabric. I began to hear their voices, long strings of sound that I did not understand, but comprehended completely. Each phrase was a snippet of a life scattered in passing. Then we were amongst them – myself, the invisible presence of Ahriman, and the daemon. Smells of sweat, spice, and stagnant water mingled as the crowds brushed past, close enough to touch.

Then we rose again, and skimmed the tops of the buildings. At the peak of the highest tower we came to a woman sat alone underneath an awning of wood and fabric. Her face was just beginning to show the lines and creases of age. Her eyes were dark, the irises two circles of polished cedar set in ivory. On a low table before her lay sheets of parchment, and she held an abacus of glass beads suspended on a bronze frame.

The woman’s eyes never rose from the paper, and beads clacked back and forth on the counting frame. As we watched, a servant in a polished glass mask silently placed a jug of scented water and a cup by her elbow. She did not look up and the water remained untouched.

‘She can undo any part of the lives of any of the men and women we saw in the streets, and she can do it with a word,’ said the daemon. ‘Her people call her the Sun Queen, because from her comes all that lives. People in lands far from here quake at rumours of her anger. Like her forebears she has broken enemies and taken their lands as her own. Here, in this small slice of existence she is not a

human. She is a goddess.’ The daemon breathed, and I felt its rank presence shiver through me as it shook its head. ‘And in a few moments the most important thing she has, will be no more.’

‘Is this a demonstration of your power?’ sneered Ahriman. ‘You killed them and left all they made in the dust?’

‘Oh, no, no... This kingdom will live for centuries more. In a millennium it will cover the planet it was born on. In three millennia it will burn planets that defy it. In ten... well... that is another story.’

My eye suddenly caught something at the edge of my sight. Out beyond, on the edge of the blue dome of the sky a new, bright star began to glitter. The star swelled, growing brighter with every second. Somewhere down in the streets a cry rose over the city’s murmur. The star became a ragged sphere of white light. The sound of the distant crowd was now a swelling chorus of panic. The woman, who was a queen, looked up at last, a frown on her face. Her eyes found the bloated star. For a second she stared, and then she was across the tiled roof, shouting for her servants as the star grew and grew. The cries from the streets below were howls of terror now, and the summit of the building was crowded with figures, and shouting voices. The star was a second sun.

‘Enough,’ said Ahriman. ‘I do not need to see this.’

‘But you do,’ said the daemon, ‘and you bade me show you what I can offer you.’ The star was no longer a star. It was a shrieking wall of white light dragging across the sky. ‘Watch.’

And then it was above the city, and the cries of fear became silence.

A rippled ceiling of light hid the sky. Growths of fire, and smoke rippled across it. Vast spurs of blackened metal cut through the fire cloud like shark fins through an inverted sea. And then, as fast as it had arrived, it was gone. After a minute it was a fading star on the opposite horizon.

Then everyone was shouting, and calling out.

Amidst the clamour, the queen stood silent and still, staring at the abacus on her table.

‘Do you see now?’ asked the daemon.

‘The fire of inspiration falling from the sky,’ said Ahriman. ‘The manifestation of something so great and terrible, and outside of comprehension, that it opens these peoples’ eyes to the limits of their knowledge. If you know me as you claim, then you should know that this illustration of the power of enlightenment is wasted.’

‘Yes, but no. Look at her face. Really look at her face. Think of the strength that

was in those eyes before. There was worry of course. Doubt, naturally, but what is there now?

‘Fear, determination, anger, curiosity.’

‘And what is gone that was there before.’

‘I... do not...’

‘The consolation of ignorance Ahriman. The simple comfort of knowing that no matter the terrors and possibilities that the world offers and threatens, those things are understood, measured. Known.’

‘Why show me that?’

‘As a gift. As a warning. As an offer.’

‘There is no value in ignorance,’ said Ahriman.

‘No? Are you certain? Would you like to see what I will show you next?’

The daemon did not wait for a reply. The city, and the queen, and the sound of new-born enlightenment, vanished.

A figure stood before us, bent over a lectern, his face lit and shadowed by the light of the flames. He wore black robes edged in white. Pictograms ran down the fabric, coiling in gold and silver stitches.

‘To be mortal is to be made of the past,’ said the daemon, ‘all the moments of what has been piled up to make the present.’

A scroll covered the face of the lectern, the handles of the twin spools of parchment turning in the figure’s hands. He looked human at a glance, but he was not. Behind him a suit of crimson and ivory armour hung from a chrome frame, like a snap shot of a dissected man.

I knew him. I knew the hunger and focus in his stare. I knew the smile that touched his lips as the scroll passed before his eyes. I knew that at this moment he knew nothing of what awaited him in the centuries to come. I knew him better than a brother or a father.

He was me.

‘This has no value,’ said Ahriman. ‘I remember Ctesias as he was. I remember them all, living and dead.’

‘Yes, they live in your memory don’t they? All the dead who fell, all the ghosts of mistakes and dreams gone astray.’ More shapes appeared, sketches of armour, limbs, and faces drawn in smoke – a Legion of the lost spread out to a vanishing point. ‘This is how you see them is it not, Ahriman?’ I saw faces I knew and had not seen for centuries: Khayon, Hathor Maat, Phosis T’Kar, and beyond them hundreds more. Thousands. Tens of thousands. ‘The measured wisdom in their

eyes, the nobility in their aspect, the ideals of illumination clinging to their every breath. So noble, so misunderstood. Worth something. Worth everything. Worth saving.'

'They are as they were,' said Ahriman, and I heard the catch in his voice, and then the bitterness. 'But do not claim to be able to turn time back to this. That is beyond the power of the gods you serve.'

'I do not serve the gods, and your vision is reassuringly narrow. The past is not what I am offering you. I said that I would only show you truth, and so I have, and so I do...'

Names began to rise out of the dark, a rolling litany of names chanted by unseen voices.

'...Gilgamos, Ohrmuzd, Ctesias, Iskandar Khayon, Magnus, Tolbek, Helio Isidorus...'

The Legion before us began to shine. Light grew out of them, and spread above their heads and shoulders in halos of golden light. Their skin and armour became translucent shells over the blaze within.

'...Mabius Ro, Nycteus, Menkaura, Gaumata, Amon, Zebul, Ketuel, Ankhu Anen, Jehoel, Midrash, Arvida, Kiu...'

They rose into the air and their faces were not noble, but proud, and cold, and hungry. Cords of congealed flesh hung from them, connecting each of them to a great tangle of oily light which hung above.

'...Zabaia, Siamak, Ignis, Sanakht, Khalophis, Atharva, Phosis T'Kar, Auramagma, Hathor Maat, Uthizaar...'

Sickly bright colours moved through the knotted mass. Eyes winked from within its coils, and mouths chattered in countless half-heard voices.

'See them,' said the daemon. 'See them as they were.'

'No,' breathed Ahriman. 'This is not truth. I saved them. I saved them from this. They were not like this, they were never like this.'

'They were and are as you see them. They have not changed. It is you who have changed.'

'This is—'

'Truth. Remember the gift of ignorance, Ahriman. Remember that. You can have the lie if you wish. It can even be made real. You can remake your Legion as you remember them. It will be a lie, but lies can easily be believed, just as truth can be forgotten.'

Ahriman did not reply, and the legion of glowing figures began to flicker, and

their names faded with them.

‘Silence,’ said the daemon, ‘is as good an answer as any. You both believe me and don’t. Such delicious paradox. So you do not want truth, nor lies, nor ignorance. What remains for me to lay at the feet of Ahriman, greatest of sorcerers, greatest of fools?’ ‘Let us see. Let me show you my last gift.’

The sky was fire and jagged light. Black towers broke the horizon. Streaks of silver rose from the ground, tearing into clouds of creatures pouring from a dark rift which split the burning sky from horizon to horizon. Flat shapes of skin and teeth spiralled in the air. Armies covered the ground, glinting with armour, blood, and blade edges. Huge beasts strode amongst the sea of warriors, their hides scaled in rusted iron. The air vibrated with gunfire, and thunder strikes.

‘Where is this?’ asked Ahriman

‘A battlefield that has yet to be,’ replied the daemon.

A warrior in blue armour stepped into view, and buried a fire-edged axe in a creature of rotting skin and tentacles. The creature exploded, and flies and maggots swarmed up the axe-man’s arm as he drew back. Yellow pus smoked as it ate into his armour. The sound of great wing beats filled our ears and a shadow fell across the battlefield. A towering figure landed before us, wings folding an instant before it swung the cleaver in its fist. A circle of warriors in blue crystal armour fell, blood flickering out, burning and curdling as it touched the air.

The figure was huge. Its jaws lolled in a wide cave of black meat. Pus seeped from between its cracked teeth, and its wings shivered as it looked around. Smoke boiled from it, pulsing and shimmering like a living veil... and an instant later, I realised that it was not smoke. It was a cloud of coal-black flies. Gunfire plucked at the figure’s flesh and rang from its armour. It turned its head to the sky and bellowed.

Its rattling cry shook the air with challenge. A second monstrous figure dropped from the sky. Twin pinions spread from its shoulders, each feather a tongue of blue flame. The down draft of each sweep shimmered with heat, and smelled of incense. Blue fire sheeted from it as it dived.

It struck the first figure with a sound of breaking bone and vaporising fat. The pair cannoned through ranks of warriors in a tangle of blades, claws and fire. The bloated creature roared as claws ripped chunks from its arms. They rose from the ground, wings of feather and skin beating. Their hands locked around each other’s necks.

The image froze, and silence replaced the clamour.

‘Do you recognise them?’ asked the daemon.

‘I do not,’ said Ahriman.

‘You knew them both once. You know one of them still.’

Ahriman did not answer, and I knew that he would be doing as I was, staring at the two monsters, wondering who they had been. They were daemons, immortal princes of the Changer of Ways, and the Father of Plagues. Both had once been mortals, but their devotion to their chosen gods had bought them ascension to the circles of the neverborn.

‘The one made of dead blubber and poison is Garthak,’ said the daemon, ‘once called the Last Blade, Chieftain of the Death Sight cohort of the Sons of Horus. You—’

‘I shared the field with him at the fall of Marnicia,’ said Ahriman. ‘I remember. A good man.’

‘Not now,’ said the daemon with a chuckle. ‘Now he is just a slave.’

‘And the other?’

‘You do not recognise him? Well, I suppose he is different to how he seems to you now. If you do not see the resemblance I will not spoil the eventual surprise. We are not here for him though, or for poor Garthak. We are here so that you can see the battle they fight.’

‘This could be any one of a million battlefields on a thousand worlds. Many more than these two have fallen. Their tragedies are not unique.’

‘You are correct. This battle is not exceptional, and that, my clever mortal, is the point. This is not just a battle between two creatures of the warp – it is a clash of greater powers written small. This is part of the war fought by slaves to darkness on uncountable battlefields. Fought not because they chose to fight, but because they have no choice. Fought by creatures such as you.’

‘I am not—’

‘Not what? A slave? You are, Ahriman. Every beat of your blood, and every conjured thought in your skull, serves the Changer of Ways.’

‘You speak—’

‘From the first moment you saw the stars in the sky you served the God of Change. Every beat of your life has happened for its amusement.’

‘I am no one’s slave, and no one’s son!’

‘It burns, does it not?’ laughed the daemon. ‘Truth, ignorance, power, there are no things deeper, no things darker, no fires more fierce. You are a slave. Your choices are not your own, no matter what you may believe. I offer you freedom,

Ahriman. Take Ctesias's place in my debt, and the chains will fall.' Its voice was low, crooning, like a mother offering comfort to a child. 'No other can promise you this. No other has broken those chains themselves. I alone am the salvation you crave.'

The tableau of battle was dissolving, and the daemon's presence was a suffocating coil of pressure – squeezing tighter, anticipation and hunger seeping from it like heat from a fire. I could feel Ahriman's presence then, the hard crystal of his mind resisting the slow strangling. He was strong, but if I had been able to speak I would have told him that he was not strong enough.

'This is a trap,' breathed Ahriman. 'You never wanted Ctesias. You knew I would come for him, and so you sent the daemon hounds to kill him. You have been waiting for Ctesias to fail, so that you could engineer this moment. You are here for me.'

'The great intellect revealed at last. The gods will fall, and the warp will howl at the foot of *my* throne. You may join me in that future, Ahriman. It can be yours.'

'No.'

'Then you will lose what you came to save.'

Needle points of ice pierced me and ripped downwards, and the daemon's anger and spite was roaring through my blind soul like a wind of knives. And then I heard something that terrified me more than the pain of my torment.

Ahriman laughed.

'So certain,' he said, and there was no humour in his voice. Only iron. 'So used to power. So much a slave yourself that you cannot see that your delusions are the amusements of the gods you rebel against.' I could feel the daemon's anger and confusion. 'And so certain of your power that you forget your nature and limits. You have lingered here too long... *Be'lakor*. And while this is a trap, it is not yours.'

'No!' roared *Be'lakor*.

Cracks of white and blue light split my sight, blinding me, pulling me down. *Be'lakor* howled and blackness howled with it. I was coming apart. I was shreds of thought separating under a blade. I was a single, long shriek of agony.

And then colour and sound and feeling rushed in, and I had an instant of numb disbelief before I began to drown in my own blood.

Chanting voices poured into my ears. Flame light spiralled around and above me. I could see a ring of figures in blue armour and white robes. Their hands were raised, fingers linked by chains of lightning. I was lying on my back, blood

pulsing from the wounds in my chest and neck, pink foam frothing as I gasped. Ahriman stood above me, his horned helm a crown of brilliant light, his open hand splayed above my eyes. His voice echoed as he called

‘I call you from the shadow of this soul, Be’lakor.’

Darkness vomited from my lips. The spaces between the lights dimmed. A black cloud swelled through the air, caged by the fire and lightning.

‘I call you into the light!’

The shadow cloud twisted, searching for a way out. Shapes formed within it, sketches in shades of midnight.

‘I call you!’

The cloud rushed outwards, and then snapped back into something that had shape, something less and more real than smoke. And at last I saw Be’lakor. I had never seen him before. He was many things at once, images and forms overlaid and combined, all the same and all separate: a withered skeleton with twisted horns of rotting bone, a towering creature of bare flesh and red flame, a figure of flowing obsidian muscle, a shadow like the flutter of great wings. He loomed larger than sight, his presence ice and cold oblivion.

‘You will burn, sorcerer!’ roared Be’lakor. ‘I will make your dreams ashes!’

‘I have an offer for you, daemon.’ Ahriman sounded utterly unconcerned. ‘A trade.’

‘I will drag your soul through the garden of knives. I will stew it in the pools of decay, and burn it on the fires of wrath.’

‘Control is made of knowing what we have, and want we want. Power is having something that someone else wants and cannot have. I make you a simple offer. You release Ctesias from your debt, you heal his wounds, and you grant me the answer to one question. For this I will give you freedom.’

‘You dare—’

‘If you do not accept this, I will bind you into Ctesias’s corpse, and bury that corpse beneath stone, and fire, and leave it there until the stars turn cold.’

‘You do not have the strength.’

‘I do. It might cost, but what does not have a price?’

Through the haze of blood and fading life, I saw Be’lakor, the First Prince of Chaos and Master of Shadow, shake with rage, and then become still.

‘I...’ it hissed. ‘I accept your terms.’

‘You submit to release my brother Ctesias from all bonds made between you, to return him to life, to give me the answering of one question I will speak to you?’

‘I do.’

‘Pledge it!’

‘By the hidden marks of my name, by all the power that is mine, by the fortune of all that I will bring to being, I answer and am bound by your gift.’

‘Good... now make it so.’

The daemon twisted, its substance spiralling into a column of fire and black smoke. I felt my heart beat a last time, and felt thousands of invisible hands grip my flesh and begin to pull me down. And with the last scrap of life I heard Ahriman speak his question to the daemon, and I heard Be’lakor laugh as he answered, and then I felt the memory of both question and answer vanish as the blackness finally took me.

I woke to the quiet beat of my twin hearts, and found Ahriman alone standing above me. My blood had caked to a crust on my face. I touched my throat and chest where the death wounds had bled before, and found smooth skin and flesh inside the breaks in my armour. I looked up at Ahriman.

‘We have much to do, brother,’ he said, ‘and once again I thank you for your service.’

‘Do not expect my thanks in return. You...’

‘I did what I needed.’

‘And what did you need from such a creature?’

‘A curious question from you, Ctesias, and one I will not answer.’

I began to rise. My body did not feel pained or damaged, but it did not feel wholly connected to me, as though it were a graft still bonding to my senses. I turned and walked away from Ahriman, treading over the remains of the ritual marks burnt onto the deck.

‘What did the daemon promise you the first time?’ asked Ahriman from behind me.

The question made me pause, and I considered for a second not answering.

‘You mean that you did not know that as well?’ I asked, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice. ‘Can there be something that is beyond your knowing, brother?’ I took another step, and then paused, and turned back to face Ahriman. ‘It promised that it would keep me from what awaits my soul when I die. All the daemons I have bound, all of them I have enslaved, they wait for me beyond the veil. That is what it said it would spare me. That when I died it would come for me, that it would keep me from them.’

‘And what did you give it return for that gift?’

I did not answer him, but turned away and walked from his presence. We all

have our secrets to keep, and mine are my own.



V GATES OF RUIN

*'Do not pity those who are lost on the path. Pity those who reach its end,
and see at last what they were seeking'*

– Malcador the Sigillite, *Admonitions to the Solar Lords*

I am a follower who followed his lord.

My lord was Ahriman, and I am Ctesias. These are the stories of my time in his service, laid down in words as I watch my life fade with the candle that lights these pages. I will die soon, and with me so much of the past will die. There are others that were there, at Ahriman's side, in that lost age: Kiu, Sanakht, Gaumata, Gilgames, and later Credus, Ignis and the rest. Some perhaps still live now, but how many remember how things were in that time between the fall of Amon and the search for the Athenaeum?

Time has a habit of burying lesser events under the weight of later calamity and triumph. The extraordinary seems diminished when compared to the momentous, but it is still important, it still has meaning. So it is that I choose now to write not of the grand and terrible endeavours which would come later, but of the steps which took us there. This is the story of one such step, of how Ahriman took us out of the Eye of Terror for the first time, on our first exodus from the hell that is our home.

The creature tried to raise its head from the altar. Silver chains clinked as it

moved, and symbols on the altar glowed brighter. White candles burned with a steady green light at the edge of my sight, but they did nothing to banish the darkness of the chamber. The only true illumination was the cold glow of my staff, and the glow coming from within the chained creature.

I say creature, because that was what it was. The spite of the daemon had swallowed the flesh of the human that I had given it as a host. Its limbs had grown and bent with new joints. Black quills had sprouted from its back and shoulders, and the face was an explosion of fangs and red, lidless eyes. The skin stretched over its bones was transparent and the colour of amber. Within its body, organs floated like jellyfish and blood vessels were threads of red light. The man I had taken from the *Sycorax*'s machine decks remained only as a twitching pulse of soul light, shrinking as the imprisoned daemon ate it.

The creature strained against the chains for a second, and then flopped back onto the altar. It hissed at me, its face pulsing.

I sighed. It was the fourth daemon I had bound and put to the question, and so far each of them had proved as unhelpful as the last. It was not the most powerful daemon I could summon, but it was cunning and knowing. I had more, thousands more, all bound by their true names that I broke into fragments and kept in my memory. The shards of those names scratched at the edge of my thoughts, like insects in boxes. They wanted me to let them out.

If things did not start going better, some of them might get their wish, I thought. How many more times would I have to go through this tedious cycle before Ahriman at last accepted that there was no way of finding what he sought.

Knowing him, I was not sure that we would ever reach that point. I was more likely to run out of human hosts, daemons to questions and patience long before he would admit defeat. He had given this task to me and to me alone. While he sat in his tower and cast his mind into the realm of dreams, I had to find a way to do the impossible. I had to find a way out of the Eye of Terror.

'Give it to me,' I said, and the moisture of my breath fell as a frost through the psychically charged air. 'Give it to me and I will release you, and burn the memory of your true name from my mind.'

The creature hissed, and strained against the chains again.

'Very well,' I said, and closed my eyes for a few seconds. I was really very tired.

I moved away from the altar to where the shadows hid iron shelves worked into the chamber's walls. My hand found the stone jar I was looking for, and my fingers tingled as I picked it up. My mind formed a series of words, and the

pictograms on the jar's surface lit with a molten glow. I let go of my staff and it began to rotate in place beside me. The jar's lid came free in my hand. The smell of grave rot filled the air. I walked towards the creature on the altar. It had shrunk. The iron quills bristled from its flesh. Every one of its eyes fixed on the jar in my hand.

Daemons do not feel fear. They do not *feel* anything that we might consider emotion. They *are* emotion. A daemon is hate, desire and rage all congealed into things that want nothing more than to burn the mortal world that created them. They don't fear any more than a fish drowns. But rules and rivalries run through every mote of their existence, unbreakable and undeniable. And because of that nature there are things that even they cannot bear. There are things which, if they were mortal, we would say terrify them. I could banish the daemon. I could bind it for aeons, but both those were not threat enough. So instead I was going to give this daemon to another of its kind. I was going to let its essence be consumed by its antithesis. I was going to feed it to a daemon of decay.

'I know my feelings on this are both irrelevant and incomprehensible to you, but I would really rather not do this.'

I stepped up to the altar and looked down at the creature. It was very still. For a second it almost seemed like a living thing.

'I do not say that from pity. Just in case that was a point of confusion. It is more that while this will be as bad as such things can be for your kind, it will cost me as much to replace the resources that I am expending on this question.' I reached into the jar. The thing which emerged between my fingers looked like a scorpion made of polished bone and dried sinew. Its legs shifted with a dull creak as it clung to my hand. 'But needs must.'

The creature of the altar exploded upwards, screeching, limbs writhing, skin stretching. The chains snapped tight, and sigils flared on the altar. I muttered a word and dropped the thing of bone from my fingers. It grew as it fell, bone legs snapping out, sacks of yellow venoms swelling across its back. It landed on the creature. Scraps of flesh and skin sprayed up as it scabbled into the creature's torso. Oily black smoke poured into the air with overlapping cries of birds. The creature was juddering, its flesh crawling with blisters, its veins clotting to black rot.

'Give it to me,' I spat. The creature on the altar was shaking from side to side so fast that it was a chained blur. The click of bones and the hiss of venom beat in my ears as the scorpion dug deeper into the red meat. 'Give me the way to find Antilline Abyss.'

'Gates... of... Ruin...' The words rose from the creature. I raised my hand over it and spoke a silent word. The thing of bone and decay went still inside the creature's mangled torso.

'The Gates of Ruin?' I repeated softly.

'All those who tread the path you seek only reach it through the Gates of Ruin.'

'That is fascinating, and I thank you for the additional detail, but it does not suffice.'

I begin to murmur a fresh set of syllables, and the thing of bone squirms to life again.

'The Gates of Ruin are the way you will find it!' it howls. I pause and the bone thing clatters to stillness.

'Explain, or I will let it drag you into the gardens of decay.'

'What you call the Antilline Abyss is a hole threaded through our dominion, a tunnel through the tides of what you insist on calling the Eye of Terror. Its edges are bound by the scraps of souls caught in the tides. They scream. The Gates do not just mark its beginning. They call to those that can hear them.'

The creature on the altar smiled, and dozens of sets of lips peeled open across its body. Sharp white teeth gleamed at me. **'The Gates of Ruin sing, and sing without end. If you hear them you will find what you seek.'**

I looked at the creature for a second. Daemons are lies, and the one I had bound to answer to the altar was a princeling of tricksters. But I have had millennia of binding such beings and cutting away their ability to deceive. It is my art, and I would hazard that there are few who can rival me in its mastery.

'Why do the Gates sing?' I asked.

'That I cannot answer,' it said with a chuckle that dribbled black blood from its grinning mouths. **'But I can give you the ears to hear their song.'**

I do not answer for a long moment. You must understand that the Eye in which the warp and reality mingle is ringed by storms and currents. Ships that try to pass that border are likely to be ripped apart. There are ways through the storms. The greatest and most stable of these is the Cadian Gate, but the Imperium stands guard over that pass, and those not wishing to sacrifice vast armies cannot hope to go that way. That leaves the other, more dangerous, ways that are concealed by myth and lies. Ways like the Antilline Abyss.

I do not, and never have, seen the need of so many of our kind to return to the Imperium. We are lost and this hell is both our reward and our sanctuary. We are beasts of the Eye, and what can the realms outside it offer us but the taste of

revenge? But Ahriman had commanded me to find a way, and I had agreed to serve his will. For a price, of course.

I nodded at last, and flicked my hand above the creature on the altar. The thing of bone and venom pulled from the rotting cavity it had made in the creature's chest and flew to my hand. It shrank as it tumbled through the air, and curled into my palm when it landed. I slid it back into the jar.

'Give me the means to hear the song of the Gates of Ruin,' I said, 'and I will free you, and give you back your name. You have my bond.'

The creature chuckled.

'**Agreed,**' it said. Then its back arched and it began to shake. Muscles swelled and shrank along its torso, pulsing as one of its mouths opened. The chains snapped taut. A great gush of blood fountained from its mouth, and spattered down onto the altar and floor. Something hard hit the floor at my feet with a crack.

The creature collapsed to stillness. I bent down and picked up the object that lay in a pool of blood before me. It was a black sphere, or at least that is how it seemed until I lifted it to the light. I wiped the sticky film of blood from it and turned it in my fingers. A dim amethyst glow kindled in its centre, and from far away I heard voices singing, high and clear and sharp.

'**You have it,**' hissed the daemon. '**Now honour your debt, sorcerer.**'

With an effort I tucked the black sphere into a pouch at my waist. The song faded but still lingered on the edge of my hearing. I looked at the creature.

'Be gone,' I said, and brought my open hand down on the altar. A crack of thunder rolled through the chamber. The reek of burning hair and ozone flooded my mouth. The host creature flashed to cold cinders.

I shivered, suddenly more weary than I had been only moments before. I turned away from the altar and walked towards the chamber's only door, picking my staff from the air as I went.

+Wake the Navigator, Astraeos,+ I sent, aiming the thought for where his mind lurked in the *Sycorax*'s high citadel.

+You have a course for the Abyss?+ came Astraeos's reply, edged with blunt dislike.

+In a manner of speaking. I have a song for him to hear.+

'You should not come in here,' said Silvanus as I entered his chamber. The Navigator sat on the floor, a black velvet robe clutched around him. A mass of needle-tipped tubes hung from the ceiling above a couch moulded to the

impression of a human body. Beads of viscous liquid hung from some of the dangling needles. I could smell the sweet traces of sedatives and nerve signal inhibitors evaporating into the air.

+Oh, should I not?+ I sent. The Navigator flinched at my sending. I almost laughed. His skin was white-grey and drawn over fine bones. A strip of black silk wound around his head. The fabric bulged slightly where it crossed his forehead. Beneath the silk and embroidered stars his third eye rolled in its socket so as not to look at me. His mind radiated discomfort in a heavy grey wave. He was feeling sick, partly because of the effects of waking from his drug coma, and partly because that was the way he felt most of the time. His name was Silvanus Yeshar, and he did not like being awake; he did not like being what he was.

‘You...’ he began to glance up at me, then hesitated and looked to where Astraeos stood. ‘Nothing,’ he said, at last and rubbed his palms over his eyes. Thin webs of skin spanned the gaps between some of the fingers.

+You don’t like us being here, do you?+ I sent. He glanced up at me, winced and looked down again, shaking his head. +You think this is your place, and that by coming here we give you bad dreams.+

‘Get out of my head!’

+I hate to say it, Silvanus, but your dreams have nothing to do with us being here.+ I bent down and peeled his fingers from his face so that his left eye peeked out at me. There were flecks of blood around the iris. +It is because you are damned, little man. Totally, and utterly *damned*. Just like the rest of us.+

+Leave him,+ came Astraeos’s thought, hard and sharp. He flinched away from where he stood by the door.

+Interesting,+ I sent without looking around. +Have you added sentimentality to your catalogue of flaws, Astraeos? Or do you see this one as some sort of pet?+

I felt the brush of anger like a tongue of flames across my senses. Then it vanished. I looked around in time to see Astraeos take his hand from the sword at his waist. His mind shivered to hard stillness.

+Do what you came for,+ he sent, tight control vibrating through him.

+I am glad your restraint is well practiced.+ I made myself grin at him. His anger gave me little pleasure, but sometimes a little is enough.

I looked back to the hunched form of Silvanus.

+I have something for you, Navigator. Something you need to hear.+

His lip trembled but I could feel anger surge in him, growing to blot out the fear.

‘Go and die somewhere,’ he hissed.

I laughed, and let go of his fingers.

+I like you Silvanus. I really do.+ Confusion rolled across his face and thoughts. +But I am afraid I need you to do something. It will not be pleasant. It will be a very long way from pleasant. But I have no choice. And neither do you.+

He shivered and glanced at me, but said nothing. I reached into the pouch at my waist and pulled the dark sphere into the light. High and shrill notes filled my senses as soon as my fingers touched it. I fought to stop myself from shivering as sharp pain and soft warmth slid up my nerves.

Silvanus looked at it, and vomited a mixture of bile and blood onto the floor.

‘No!’ he cried, and retched again. ‘No, never!’ He scrabbled backwards, trailing strings of sticky spit. His eyes stayed fixed on the sphere. I could see fresh pinpricks of blood around his pupils. ‘Get that thing away from me!’

I stepped forward. He shook his head, and the movement became a juddering spasm. Behind me I sensed Astraeos come away from the wall and draw his sword in a single flow of muscle and mind. He was between us in an eye blink, the ice light of his will shining from his sword’s edge.

+The Navigator is under Ahriman’s protection.+ The sending growled with shaped power. I felt the wall of his will slide around my limbs. Warding parchments burnt from armour. I swallowed carefully. I have been many things, but a warrior or battle psyker the equal of Astraeos was never one of them.

+Whose bidding do you think I do here, Astraeos?+ I sent, making sure that my thoughts held a measure of strength in them.

+He commanded you to do this?+

+He commanded me to find a way out of the Eye, and he did not specify any restriction on how I achieved that.+ I glanced at Silvanus, and then back at Astraeos. +When you have known Ahriman a little longer you will find that his ideals extend to ends, not means.+ I grinned again. Part of me could not help it. +When there is a choice between succeeding and failing he rarely quibbles over the price of victory.+

He stared at me, the green lens of his augmented eye a hard and steady light.

+He will not be harmed?+

+More than he has been already by being a Navigator puppeted by a coven of sorcerers to steer through a realm swarming with the never-born?+ I shrugged both mentally and physically. +No. He will not be harmed. I will keep him safe. Though I cannot say that the experience will not leave its mark on him.+

Astraeos held his stare, and his mental grip on me did not release, though I could almost hear the thoughts turning over in his mind. I sighed, and closed my eyes.

+If you are going to take the irrational path could we at least move past this part?+

The telekinetic blow rippled through my armour and body and tore me from the deck. I felt the sphere shiver, slip from my fingers, and land on the deck with a heavy crack. I landed face down, and felt the broken edges of bones grind in my limbs. I would have some healing to do later. I pulled myself up in time to see Astraeos sheathing his blade. He looked down at me, power radiating off him like the downdraft of vast wings. I confess that I was impressed. Even after all this time, I still am.

+Is that the extent of the point you wanted to make?+

He snarled, turned his back and returned to his position at the side of the chamber.

I looked back to Silvanus. The black sphere lay on the floor between us where it had fallen from my hand. He looked at it, and then back up to me.

‘No...’ he whispered, and there were flecks of blood in the tears rolling down his cheeks.

I picked the sphere up, and winced as the pain of my freshly broken bones flared brightly. The song surrounded me again.

+Yes,+ I sent, and pulled him upright with my free hand. +I need you for this. Ahriman needs you for this. Be thankful for it. It is what is keeping you alive. Now, open your hand.+

‘Please...’

+Open your hand.+ I put iron and pain into the sending, and his hand came up, long fingers opening like the legs of a pale spider. +Hear the song, and lead us to the Gates of Ruin,+ I sent, and dropped the sphere onto his palm.

+You are disappointed.+

I twitched my eyes at Astraeos. We had been silent in word and thought since we had come from the Navigator’s chambers. The *Sycorax* lay in the warp-tainted void and waited, just as it had done for many weeks. The passages we walked murmured with the sounds of distant machines, but few of the crew came to these high levels, and most that did would be avoiding encountering us. Two sorcerers walking in warplate, armed with sword and staff and the power to break reality, can have that effect.

+Disappointed?+ I mentally shrugged. +No.+

+But you were not anticipating how the matter has turned out?'

+Are you trying to take pleasure in what you see as my failure?+ I shook my head. +I did not fail. I did not know exactly what would happen. That is the nature of what I do. The nature of what we all do, in fact. From your swinging all that mental force around to Ahriman's peeling truths from the future. None of it is science no matter what any of my brothers choose to believe when they mutter about aetheric energy. All of it is trying to shape and ride the winds of a storm. Better to be glad you get there than worry how.+

+The Navigator--+

+Will lead us to the Gates of Ruin,+ I interrupted, +and through the Antilline Abyss.+

Astraeos glanced at me out of the corner of his good eye, and took his turn to shrug.

+If you are certain.+

I nodded, but did not reply.

In truth I was not certain. We had left Silvanus in his chambers, curled in his sleep cradle, pressing the sphere to the fabric over his third eye. He had been smiling, and his thoughts were slow, calm circles of release and contentment.

We walked on in uncomfortable silence, my staff tapping on my strides, Astraeos always keeping half a pace ahead of me.

+The one who Ahriman summoned approaches,+ sent Astraeos. +The ship mistress says his ship has just translated and is making speed to join the fleet.+ I nodded, but did not reply. Astraeos's mind pulsed with brief amusement. +Sanakht was also not pleased.+

+On this, Sanakht and I agree.+

+Were the bonds of brotherhood between your kind so weak?+

+My brothers have never liked me, and the sentiment is universally mutual. I am sure you have noticed.+ I stopped walking. Astraeos also stopped, and the scar tissue of his face shifted as he raised an eyebrow. I leant on my staff and let out a breath. +I am an outcast within my Legion as much by choice as by circumstance. But Ignis has always stood apart.+

+Why?+

+He was of the Order of Ruin, and that is as good a start as any, and... well, you will see. +

Astraeos's head swivelled up suddenly, and I could tell that he was listening to words that only he could hear.

+Ahriman has returned from his dream quest. He summons me.+

I nodded, and as I did, a wave of different voices, sensations and visions ghosted through me. The warp was shifting as though stirred by a sudden breeze.

+Of course,+ I sent. +His timing is as suspicious as ever.+ Astraeos was already moving away and neither replied or looked back. +I will come with you.+ I began to follow him.

+No,+ he snapped. +Ahriman wishes to see me alone.+

+Very well. If that is his will.+ I stopped.

+It is. Go and prepare whatever you need to with the Navigator. We will be making course soon.+

I bristled at the blunt tone of command. At heart I am a mercenary, and that means that I consider everyone's authority over me fleeting.

+You seem very certain of what is about to happen.+

+Ahriman has what he has been seeking.+ He stopped and turned slowly and looked back at me, an expression that was probably intended as a smile cutting across his face. +When he achieves one step on a path, the next follows swiftly. When you have served Ahriman a little longer you will understand this, I am sure.+

I could not bring myself to smile in reply.

+Silvanus.+

The Navigator did not move or reply.

+Silvanus, you will answer me.+

The sending was sharp, close to a mental blow. Still he did not move. I stepped closer, bending with a hum and whine of armour. The Navigator lay in his sleep cradle, his knees tucked up to his chest, his head tucked down so that he seemed to imitate a foetus. Sweat had plastered his black robes to his skin. He was breathing heavily and slowly. I could see the shape of his ribs rising and falling. He still had the black orb pressed to his forehead, but his eyes were shut. I touched the outer skin of his mind, but met neither resistance nor thoughts, just a warm flow of softness and calm.

'Silvanus,' I said with my true voice. Still there was no response. I gathered my thoughts and focus, and prepared to push deeper into his mind.

The doors to the chamber opened behind me. Pistons and servos whined as the deck shook with heavy steps. The presence of minds breathed across my senses as a wave of flame. My skin prickled and the wards etched into my armour and tattooed across my skin began to bloom with heat.

+He will not answer you.+

I sighed, and straightened.

+Does your mastery now extend beyond numbers and sums?+

I heard a clatter of gears and binaric.

‘No, that course of action is unnecessary,’ said a dry and clipped voiced that was the mirror of the voice that had just spoken in my mind. It was also not talking to me. There was another short clatter that almost sounded disappointed.

‘Yes. I am certain.’

I turned slowly.

Two figures stood between me and the rest of the chamber. One was huge, the other monstrous. Ignis, Master of Ruin, wore Terminator armour in colours which were the echo of the orange and black flame of the automaton’s shell. His face was bare, the features as smooth and impassive as I remembered them. Tattooed circles and lines shifted between designs on his exposed skin. His mind flickered with cold emotionless patterns that I did not recognise and had no desire to understand.

I slid my gaze from Ignis to the sculpture in pistons and machine joints that stood beside him. A lacquered carapace of orange rode over its chest and shoulders. Geometric designs covered the armour plates, cutting the polished orange with fine lines of coal-black. It was a battle automaton, a fact that the weapons in its fists and on its back left were established without doubt. This was what he had been talking to with his mundane voice.

+A pet? Or do you keep it for conversation?+

He waited for a long moment, his eyes moving over me systematically from feet to crown. Then he shook his head slowly and precisely.

+Credence guards my life,+ he sent.

I waited but he said nothing else. My teeth clamped together. I had forgotten how it was to talk to members of the Order of Ruin. The centuries that separated that moment from the last time I had seen Ignis had been a blessing in that respect.

+Thank you for clarifying that.+

Ignis nodded once.

+You have changed since I last saw you, Ctesias.+

+How kind of you to notice.+

+My observation was not intended to give you comfort.+ His sending was leaden with lack of emotion. Perhaps it is the daemons. Perhaps they have stolen some of my patience, or gifted me with a need for emotional subtlety not

common in my kind. Whatever the cause, I felt my face twitch and my hand clench on my staff.

I closed my eyes and let out a breath, letting the enforced calm roll through me. When I opened them I looked past Ignis. Ahriman stood beside Astraeos just inside the door. Both were armoured but without helms. Ahriman was gaunt, the pits of his face deep beside the sharp lines of his bones. He looked weary, ill even, but his eyes glittered with triumph.

+What is your will, Ahriman?+ I glanced between Astraeos, Ignis and his automaton.

+You have found a way to the Antilline Abyss,+ he said, and stepped forward. I noticed that he was limping ever so slightly. A vein pulsed at his temple and his face was not just tired but drawn. +For that you have my thanks, Ctesias.+

He stopped above the still shape of Silvanus and looked at him for a long heartbeat. I could feel his thoughts turning and the currents of the warp shifting with them.

+Ignis is correct. He will not answer you if you call him with thought and voice.+

+Why?+ I asked, suddenly too tired for the dance of intellect and words.

Ahriman glanced at Ignis, and nodded.

+The pattern of the Navigator's thoughts,+ sent Ignis, +is a spiral going ever out and curling ever inwards. It eats everything else that is in his mind, and it will continue without end.+ The Master of Ruin paused, and I glanced at him. The tattoos on his face had become still, the lines seeming to splinter his features into shards. I had the sudden impression of distaste and contempt, though I could not say why. +The ratios and progression of the spiral is... a thing I would not have let come into being.+

I shivered inside my armour. I did not know what Ignis had meant exactly, but I could understand what he was trying to say. It was what I had been worried about ever since I had given the Navigator the sphere.

+His mind beats to a song,+ I sent almost before I meant to.

Ahriman nodded, and looked at me.

+Will that song lead us out of the Eye, Ctesias?+

I broke his gaze, and looked at Silvanus, curled around a daemon pearl like a sleeping child. I thought about all the things that I had done for Ahriman, and all the uses he had put me to since I had come to his service. I wondered if there was more to this situation than I saw or guessed. I wondered what else Ahriman might be trying to achieve besides breaking the Eye's shackles. I remembered

the offer he had made me when I lay bound in Amon's cells.

I blinked, shook myself and looked between the waiting faces of Ignis, Astraeos, and Ahriman.

+Yes,+ I sent. +I was not seeing if he would answer. I was seeing if he was ready. He is. He hears the song and only the song. He will take us to the pass and out of the Eye. He will take us to the Gates of Ruin.+

The warp closed over us. Fire ran down the spine of the *Sycorax* in a great burning mane as it pushed through swirls of congealed colour. Its sister ships rode beside and around it, linked to it by cords of silver blue light. Curling storms rose and fell around them, breaking over their Geller fields in shards of screaming shadow. The psychic connections between the ships billowed and snapped like ropes in a gale. Within the navigation sanctuary of the *Sycorax*, Silvanus sat and stared out at the madness beyond. Feeds and wires linked him to the helm throne, and beneath our feet a tower of machinery half a kilometre high linked his will to the ship. But the true connection between him and the fleet he guided were the minds of Ahriman and his chosen Circle.

The Circle and Ahriman played Silvanus like a puppet, using his abilities and senses like an extension of their own minds. From them, webs of telepathy stretched across the storms and current of the warp to minds who guided the other ships. It was a feat of delicate and terrifying skill. I had aided Ahriman in its creation several times since I had joined him, but on the road to the Gates of Ruin was the first time that I ever saw him follow and not lead.

Silvanus sat on the edge of his chair, the orb held in both his hands. His mundane eyes were shut, but he had shed the strip of fabric from his head and his third eye stared, unblinking, into the light of the warp. Ahriman, Astraeos and myself stood with our backs to the open shutters, our eyes closed, the displays of our helms blanked to black. What I saw came from my second sight. I am a sorcerer, and I have cast my mind into the realm beyond, I have moved through it in dreams and visions, but even then the experience is as much construction of my mind as it is of the immaterium. To see the warp directly, to bathe in the radiance of its power and madness, is to invite worse than death. Only Navigators may look upon it directly and live. And even then they pay a price.

Silvanus's face was a slack mask hanging beneath his forehead. Pink spittle ran from his open mouth. Deep within his throat a sound gurgled and hummed as he breathed. The *Sycorax* began to dance, skidding down the faces of emotional

squalls, pivoting over vortices of hate and lies. Joined together, Ahriman, Ignis and I touched his mind lightly. The link was just enough for us to keep the fleet tied to his course, but even then we could only hear the song.

It was beautiful. I mean it was really and truly the most beautiful thing I have ever experienced. It was not sound, though when I think of it the dull memories of voices and high shrill notes are all I can recall. It was sorrow and joy, and pain, sharpness and bitterness, joy and glee, and the endless, endless promise of more and more. More until you drowned. It was the finest experience I recall, and nearly the worst. I shut every door within my mind and hardened my will until it was a wall of stone. Hours flicked past in instants, or stretched to aeons. And all the while Silvanus watched the Great Ocean of Souls and gurgled in mockery of the song that pulled him on. And we went with him.

I do not know how far or how long we travelled, and if I did such measurements would be meaningless. We passed through reefs of despair, and climbed the cliffs of bronze while the heat of wars as yet unborn scorched us. We were seeds of metal and stone carried on the wind of paradox. Seeds the size of cities, and with weapons powerful enough to burn those cities to ashes, but for that time our ships were nothing: specks in the eyes of gods that are alive, and yet have never lived.

The song drew us on and on, growing louder and stronger until, without warning, it stopped.

Silvanus shrieked. Anguish and pain flashed across the mental bond with him, and for the blink of an eye I felt the terror and despair of his life crash back into him. Then Ahriman broke the bond, and the *Sycorax* dropped from the warp like a stone falling from air to water.

My eyes snapped open, and voices began to split my thoughts.

+Where are we?+

+What is happening?+

+The rest of the fleet?+

+Where are—+

+Silence.+ Ahriman's sending ended the babble. I felt my hearts hammering in my chest, the blood drumming against the inside of my ears and eyes. Stillness and quiet pressed around me. The shutters had sealed over the viewing portals. The only light in the room was from the red and green glow of our helms' eyes. +The rest of the fleet is not with us. I cannot feel any of them. Wherever we are, we are here alone.+

The automaton, Credence, flicked out a scanning laser and clattered a squall of

binary.

Ignis shook his head.

‘Be at peace,’ said Ignis, ‘but be ready.’ Credence replied by arming its weapons.

My grip on my staff tightened.

I glanced at Ahriman. He was looking at Silvanus. The Navigator was shaking. His third eye had closed, but crusted red trails painted his face from forehead to chin.

‘No no, no,’ he was babbling, true eyes wide as he gazed at the black orb. He lifted it, pressed it against his eyes, his skin, his lips, every movement faster and more frantic than the last. ‘Nooo... nooo... nooo... Come back, please, come back...’ He lifted the orb and opened his mouth to swallow it.

Ahriman’s hand closed around the Navigator’s wrist. Silvanus tried to wrench it free, but Ahriman pulled it from his fingers. The Navigator collapsed, weeping, his surface thoughts a shattered pattern of despair. Ahriman looked at the orb, then glanced at me and tossed it to me. I caught it, expecting... I do not know what I was expecting, but the cold dead weight of the thing surprised me. The sensations I had felt when I had touched it before had gone, and no song filled my head.

‘If it has ended,’ I thought aloud. ‘That must mean...’

+That it has led us to where it was supposed to,+ stated Ignis. +That is the most likely of all of the current possibilities.+

+But where are we?+ asked Astraeos.

+The Gates of Ruin,+ I sent, and all their eyes turned to me. +That is where the orb was to lead us.+

+Then why has the song ended?+ asked Astraeos, his fingers tense on the pommel of his sword. I shook my head.

+I do not know.+

+You found this way,+ spat Astraeos, disbelief and anger flowing with his thoughts. +Your craft brought us here. We were following you as much as him. And you do not know!+

+This is the warp, you simpleton!+

Astraeos began to draw his sword. Credence’s weapons twitched. Ahriman’s will slammed out, and I felt the moisture in my throat boil away as force and heat wrapped around my neck. Astraeos froze, a corona of cold light. He turned his gaze from one of us to another, and then I felt the fire in my throat cool, and the light holding Astraeos vanished.

+The ship's mistress tells me that the sensors cannot see anything outside the hull. Nothing. It is blank as far as they are concerned. And the warp drives refuse to wake.+

+Becalmed,+ sent Ignis, with a curt nod.

+No,+ sent Ahriman, +not quite. Something is happening on the lower decks. Carmenta cannot get any response from the machine wrights, but when she does get a vox signal she can hear—+

+Singing,+ I sent. Ahriman looked at me, and nodded.

+Yes.+

'Hmmm... emmm... hmmm... emmm... hmmm.'

I twisted at the sudden sound. Silvanus was sitting up at the foot of the navigation throne, rocking, a smile on his face, and humming.

'Can't you hear it?' he asked, swaying slowly. +Hmmm... emmm... Now it will never leave me. Now I will never leave it.+

I stared at him for a second, my skin creeping with cold.

Then I heard it. Broken shards of song tinkled and giggled from behind me. I turned and everyone turned at the same moment. All looked in different directions. The sound moved, skittering just out of sight. Every weapon in the chamber came to life. Ozone filled my nose. My own mind shifted, changing focus as I summoned the secret words of fire. Ahriman's mind contracted, until it was a hard point of total focus on the edge of my senses.

'Hmmm... emmm... hmmm...' Silvanus hummed, the smile on his face still drooling stained saliva.

+Open the shutters,+ I sent. I felt Astraeos's question and objection form, and bit them off before they became words. +We need to see what we face. Open them.+

He hesitated and then nodded. A finger of telekinetic force shimmered through the air, and the controls on Silvanus's throne clicked as switches flicked over. There was a clank, then another and another. One by one the shutters covering the viewports folded back, and what waited beyond looked in.

I admit, I should have known. I should have anticipated that it would play out as it did. Daemons can lie even when they tell the truth. I had asked for a way to find the Antilline Abyss, and so leave the Eye of Terror. The daemon I had bound had told me that the Gates of Ruin lay at its beginning, and then had given me the means to find them. And I had taken what it had given me and followed the thread to its end. It could not lie to me. The bindings on it forbade that, but the truth it had given me was more lethal than any lie. Even after all the

millennia that have since passed, I still wonder why I made that mistake. Perhaps it was fatigue, or arrogance. Or perhaps it was because some deep and unseen part of me did not want to leave the Eye which had become my home and sanctuary. Perhaps that impish part of me wanted us to fail. The daemon had done exactly what I had demanded; it had led us to the Gates of Ruin on the edge of the Antilline Abyss, and it had given us to our doom.

Dead ships floated across a black abyss. Clouds of turning green light edged the dark, spinning and merging like the clouds at the defining edge of a hurricane's eye. The corpses of warships spun laxly, the bones of their structures glinting through the ragged skin of their hulls. Mountain-sized chunks of debris hung like irregular moons. There were hundreds of them, thousands of designs and origins I had never seen.

And around them the daemons circled like schools of fish around already stripped bones, turning as one, their skin glimmering as it caught the light of the storms around them. If there were thousands of dead ships, there were more daemons than I could count.

My thoughts were speeding past, as time slid to treacle slowness. We were dead, and I had killed us. I had led us to a feeding pool and plunged us in. Ignorance was no excuse.

+The Gates of Ruin...+ sent Ignis, and his flat sending was like the falling of an axe.

The sending reached my mind just as a shape swam into view on the other side of the view port. It was a body of sculpted muscle and pale skin. Two circular eyes of black glinted above a slim face. The graceful line of its arms reached down to wet-edged pincer claws. It skimmed through the warp-saturated void with the slow movement of a shark cutting through water. Its mane of hair trailed behind, each strand flowing between colours. It was beautiful and revolting, and utterly terrible. I knew what it was. I had bound its kind many times before.

As I looked at it more slid into sight. More and more. I heard Silvanus rise and take a step towards the crystal viewport.

'I heard,' he moaned. 'I am here.'

I began to turn, but even as I did one of the daemons twisted and its eyes met mine. It grinned, perfect lips splitting over glass needle teeth.

The song was so loud now that it invaded my sight as well as my hearing, with the taste of bitter nectar on my tongue.

+We need to go! Now!+ shouted Astraeos.

And the world shattered into stillness.

Ahriman had not moved.

Silvanus's foot hung above the deck, his step forwards falling.

Ignis's mouth was opened, air drawing into his lungs to shout a word.

Fire wreathed Astraeos's sword.

And daemons turned towards us.

All of them.

+Fire the guns, mistress,+ came Ahriman's thought.

The daemons shot towards the *Sycorax*. Shrieks stabbed into my mind, and the world became a blur of sliced instants.

The view beyond the viewport vanished behind clouds of snarling faces and claws.

My mind formed the words of a ward.

The song was a deafening shriek in my skull.

I felt the ship shake as its guns fired.

The view beyond the crystal vanished.

Fire broke across my eyes, and my lenses dimmed as the *Sycorax* cloaked itself in detonations. The air blistered. Colour poured from nothingness, and the shrieks were rising and rising in my skull, blotting out every other thought.

A slender arm reached out of nothing and peeled open the air. Ahriman exploded forward, his hand reaching for Silvanus as a whip crack of force pulled the Navigator from his feet. A wet, red claw snapped shut where Silvanus had been. A lithe figure stepped through, claws clacking on the deck.

'Kill protocol!' shouted Ignis. Credence came forward with a thunder rolling of gears. Sheets of flame spat from its fists. Pale flesh boiled to black smoke. Casings fountained from the cannon on its shoulders. Ignis was wading towards it, blades of silver and lightning growing from his fingers as he slashed at spinning shapes.

More and more wounds were opening in the midair. The scent of hot blood and sugar filled my mouth. My eyes were filling with spinning shapes of colour. I sensed rather than saw the daemon. It lunged at me from beyond reality, its talon and body forming as it struck. I caught the blow on the head of my staff. Silver-laced iron shattered warp-born bone. The daemon spun back, screaming in pleasure and pain. I spoke a word in my mind and fire poured after it. It pirouetted aside and I saw my flame char its perfect skin.

'You will be mine,' it called to me in a voice of glass and razors. I looked for Ahriman, but the air was a curtain of fire and bleeding reality.

Astraeos was striding forwards wreathed in cold light. A daemon spun to meet

him, its arms wide. His sword was a burning sheet as he cut. The daemon ducked under his blow, sprang off the deck, and landed on his shoulders. Its arms folded around him as though in an embrace, its head dipping down beside his helm, claws reaching for his neck. I felt the pulse of raw power as invisible force ripped the daemon into the air, and tore it in two. Blood and ectoplasm misted the air. Its last sound was a laugh.

The light and fury parted, and for a second I saw Ahriman. He was pulling Silvanus to his feet, a sphere of white-hot debris orbiting him. Daemons circled him, tumbling faster than my eyes could trace. I tried to reach out with my mind but, the warp was a wall of screams and sharpness. Then Ahriman turned his head, and his eyes met mine. The daemons were crowding around him, their claws clashing against the bright sphere around him.

+Ctesias,+ he began, but I never heard the thought completed, because in that instant a claw snapped shut on my arm.

Ceramite split like skin. Blood gushed out, and I was screaming, and screaming, and the pain was the burn of acid and the taste of honey. I froze, my body juddering in place. The daemon leant closer, tongue licking needle teeth. Blurred murder filled the Navigator's sanctuary. The warp was pouring in through the ship's hull. Pale figures spun amongst spears of flame and lightning. Blood and colour sweated from empty air. I could see Ahriman, his hands on Silvanus's skull, unmoving even as a towering figure of pale skin and razor edges unfolded in the space behind him.

+Ahri—+ I shouted with all my will. But the daemon's claw bit deeper into my left arm, and fresh agony stole the warning

'Hush,' the daemon whispered to me. I felt the tip of its tongue touch my cheek. Its eyes were black pools in its perfect face. **'Hush now, my sweet one.'** The shriek poured from my throat, ripping skin and blood from my lips and mouth. Hundreds of sensations flowed through me: hunger, rage, happiness, the brush of petals and the stab of needles, on and on, more and more, brighter and faster than the grey world in which I was about to die.

The daemon shook its head and hooked the tip of its second claw onto the collar of my armour.

'Do not be afraid, beautiful soul,' it purred. It pulled the claw down and the armour over my chest parted like silk. **'This will not be over quickly, or without pain.'**

I screamed and its smile glittered with points and edges.

A fist of fire-blackened metal snapped shut on the daemon's skull. Red jelly

burst across my face. Credence yanked the body backwards and triggered the flamers in its wrists, then tossed the shrivelled remains aside. It turned, planting its legs to either side of me, and its cannon roared its challenge and defiance at the tide.

+Ctesias.+ The voice reached me, but my head was spinning. +Get up. Move.+ I began to rise, but my muscles were shuddering with the daemon's touch.

A hand reached down and yanked me up. I looked up into the lenses of Ignis's helm.

+Where is Ahriman?+ I asked, feeling the sending tremble as it formed.

+I am here, brother.+ Ahriman walked towards me, dragging Silvanus, green fire whirling from his hand.

Behind him a towering daemon followed. Jewels hung from its flesh, and clouds of musk smudged the air around it. A bovine head swayed atop its torso. It lifted one of its four limbs and pointed; the gesture was beautiful and lazy. A red tongue of fire lashed out, the air around it glittering with blood and frost.

Ahriman raised a hand. The lash coiled around his arm, pulsing, cutting and sucking through his armour. Power flared from him, exploding outwards into the warp. The psychic shock wave lifted daemons from reality and blew them to tatters of black slime. He yanked the red lash from the air and spun. The bull-headed daemon bellowed. Ahriman whipped the stolen lash of fire across its flesh. Mother-of-pearl skin parted. Black fluid gushed from the wound. Ahriman struck again, but this time the daemon slid aside as though it had not been there, and a claw lashed out. A sphere of light snapped into being around Ahriman and Silvanus. Blue flame exploded as the claw struck, and the shield burst with a flash. The daemon staggered, its claw cracked and burning. I waited for Ahriman to strike again, but no blow came. I glanced at Ahriman. He was still standing, but I could feel the fatigue shuddering off him.

The daemon hung back, circling, cloven hooves chiming on the deck, nostrils pulsing as it breathed incense into the air. The lesser daemons parted before it, hissing and mewling in delight.

The song was rising higher and higher, and I could almost see the *Sycorax* drowning as the legions of daemons swarmed through its hull. There would be blood flowing down the decks. Wards would be melting from walls, bullets flying from defence guns, and all the while the daemons would be dancing in the ruin. I could hear it, the screams and gunfire were rippling through the warp, blending with the daemon's song, calling more of them to feed like blood spilled in shark-infested water.

+There are more coming,+ I called to Ahriman. Blood was still pulsing from my arm. The daemons had paused in their assault but it was just the calm that comes before a wave crashes down. +This is not just a gate, it is a feeding ground.+

+We will not leave,+ sent Ahriman, and I could feel the control and effort in the sending. His eyes were still locked on the circling greater daemon. +The Antilline Abyss lies beyond here, and we will pass through.+

+We will die here!+

+No,+ he sent calmly. +We will not.+

+How?+ I sent, bitterness and false laughter heavy in the word. +You have a secret, or a weapon to free us?+

+I do,+ he sent, and just as he did the greater daemon charged. +I have you.+

The greater daemon was a blur of shimmering light. Its lesser kin followed with a howl.

And I understood what Ahriman wanted me to do.

I wish I could have said that I hesitated. If I had paused perhaps we really would have ended there, torn to shreds in a well of screaming souls on the edge of the Eye. I did not pause. I did what Ahriman wanted me to do. Just as he knew I would.

I reached into the segmented compartments of my mind, and threw doors of all the cells of memory open. Tens of thousands of fragmented daemon names poured into my consciousness. Ciphers snapped through my thoughts. Syllables rang together, became words and phrases, became black presences digging into the flesh of reality. The first name came to my mouth and I spoke it.

The charging daemons and the whirl of combat stuttered. Yellow and black smoke poured from my mouth. Sounds echoed and veils of rust peeled from the root and deck. A ball of blistering fat formed in the air, and grew and grew and grew, slower than spreading rot, faster than a gust of wind. The Maggot Lord, exalted servant of the Father of Decay, split reality and swelled into a full being. I had bound it in the temple of a dead oracle and never thought that I would ever want to bring it into being again. A foolish thought, even for me. I felt it pull against the bindings of the summoning. They held, but I did not give it the chance to try again.

+Destroy them,+ I willed.

The Maggot Lord exploded forwards, rotting muscle splitting its skin. The bull-headed daemon shrieked with rage and pivoted to meet it. Claws buried themselves in rolling blubber. Dead flies and pus gushed out. The Maggot Lord

laughed, and its arms gripped the bull-headed daemon and embraced it. I saw its mouth open, splintered roots of black teeth on a cave of tumours. Its laugh boomed again, just before it bit down on the bull-headed daemon's skull.

The next name was already free of my lips and a haze in the air.

Chel'thek, the Dragon of the Hundredth Gate, uncoiled from a whirl of fire, mouths spitting chains of lightning. Claws split its flanks, and wobbling spheres of arms and legs popped from the wounds. Daemons slid through the walls and floors as they surged to meet the Maggot Lord and the Dragon. Colours flashed between shades; distance and nearness collapsed then snapped back. The song of the daemons was now a discordant cacophony.

I had fallen to my knees, my unwounded hand gripping my staff, as name after name came up from within me.

Daemons of brass and anger, of hunger and mindless despair, came to my call and spilled out through the ship and void. On and on they came, the store of mortal lifetimes of collecting, binding and bargaining. I could not stop it even if I had wanted to, and in truth, I did not want to. My eyes blurred with acid tears, and my tongue had blistered, but I did not care. A wild joy had taken me. Some carry beautifully crafted swords all their lives, and never realise, until they are daubed in blood, that the pleasure comes not from owning a sword, no matter how perfect, but from letting it cut.

The daemons poured out with the words and I heard the clash as two immortal armies met, and I was glad.

In the void around the *Sycorax*, beasts of metal and glowing flesh ripped at things that ran through the vacuum on back-slung legs. On the gun decks and passages the slave crew and serfs fled for safety. Winged figures clad in brass and smoke flew beside huge rotting flies. Swarms of clawed figures crawled over rolling shapes of jellied puss and tentacles. Sheets of spell light and rainbow fire painted the vacuum.

On and on I spoke the names, my sight boiling away and my throat tearing with each new syllable until I was aware of nothing, but the sounds running from me like blood. I was dying, my life charring at the edges but I did not care.

I do not know how long I spoke, or how many daemons I named and summoned. The only thing that reached me in that age was a roar of pure focus and power which shivered through the warp. I recognised it. It was Ahriman, shouting into the beyond, the voices of Ignis and Astraeos joining him as he called the scattered ships of our fleet to come to his light. I heard that summons, but it did not shake me, and so I rolled on and my store of life and names began

to dwindle, until I was just a voice speaking to itself.

+Stop, Ctesias,+ came a voice. +It is done. +

I heard and the voice checked the flow of names.

+It is over. Dismiss them.+

I felt my mouth moving. I did not want to obey. I wanted to let all the poisonous knowledge within me flood out and leave me empty.

+Please, Ctesias.+

I obeyed, and felt the acid of my tears blister my cheeks.

The touch of a hand brought me back to awareness. I was still where I had been. Folds of charred ectoplasm and conjured flesh lay on the floor all around me. The air reeked of rotting meat and burning hair.

The first thing I saw was Silvanus, sitting on his chair, head lolled back, eyes closed. He looked dead, but for the slow rising and falling of his chest. Astraeos stood beside him. Slime and burned blood lacquered his blue armour. The ship was still – still and quiet, no song, no screams of killing, or battle.

‘We are within the Antilline Abyss,’ said Ahriman from where he crouched at my side. His head was bare, and though he looked tired I recognised satisfaction in his expression. ‘The rest of the fleet reached us. Two ships were lost to the passage, but the rest are beside us while we rest and repair. There is still a long way and many more jumps until we are beyond the Eye, but the first step is complete. We are past the Gates of Ruin.’ He nodded carefully. ‘Thanks to you.’

I looked down from his gaze. My hands and arms were shaking. My mouth filled with sharp edges and I felt weaker than a mortal child. It had become a familiar consequence of serving Ahriman, but this was the most spent and damaged I had been in a long, long time. I forced my limbs to stillness, and after a moment managed to get my tongue to work.

‘This is what you wanted me for?’ I said, my voice a croak. ‘When you negotiated my service, did you know it would come to this? The binding of the Maggot Lord, the Oracle, Be’lakor – was it just so that I could find and break the Gates of Ruin?’

He rocked back, watching me carefully. The feather touch of his thoughts brushed through my own as he read the surface of my mind. I did not have the energy to resist or muster anger.

‘No,’ he said after a long pause. ‘I did not have exactly this in mind, but it is good to see first what you are capable of. You have served the future of our Legion well, but the purpose I have for you waits in the future’

‘The Legion...’ I snorted, and felt the tremors in my flesh begin again.

‘Yes,’ he said and straightened. ‘The Legion. We all have to have something to serve. Even those who believe they do not.’

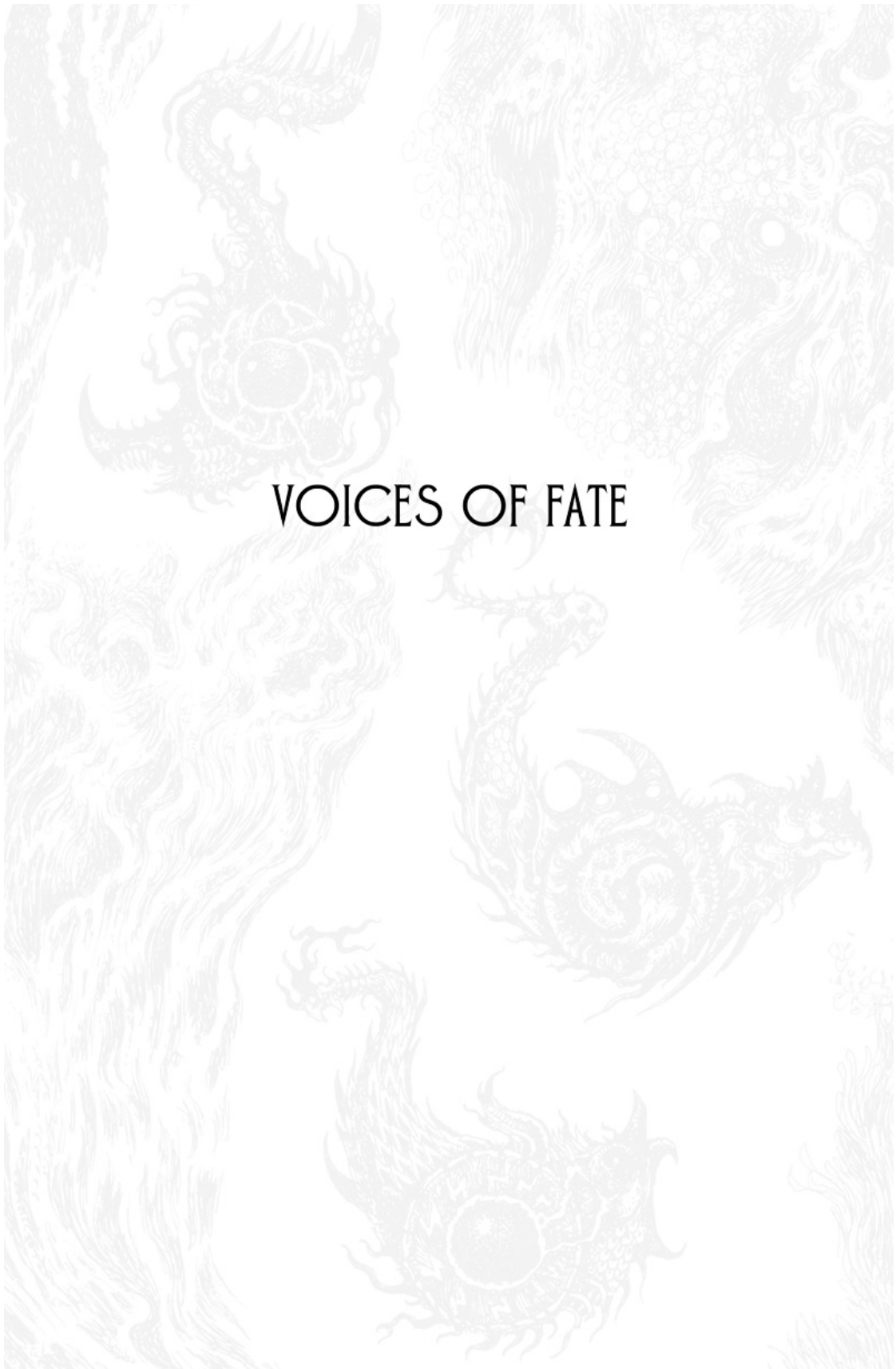
I shook my head, but could not muster a stronger objection.

Looking back, with all life times that have piled into ages between that moment and this one, I think I loathe him more now than I ever did then. I write this and I think of all that I know now that I did not then, and all the ways in which fate would play out to make so much of those days seem like cruel jests. I look back and I realise that there is one reason above all the rest that I hate Ahriman.

He was right.

We all need something to serve.

And we cannot choose what.



VOICES OF FATE



ALL IS DUST

Only dust remains. Dust and emptiness. I do not know what I am. I had a name, but it is gone. I am nothing. I am locked in darkness, tumbling without end through broken memories.

I remember blue. The blue was sky, slashed red by fire. I could smell smoke. There were pyramids on the horizon. Fire leapt from cracks in their sides.

The dead were a slick carpet on the ground. The warrior stood amongst the corpses, his grey armour spattered, his mouth open like a dog panting for air. His pupils were black bullet holes in amber irises.

Blood pumped in my veins, roaring in my ears. I was running, firing as I moved, churning the dead into bloody mud with each step. The gun in my hands shook with a thunder-rhythm.

The grey warrior snarled and leapt to meet me. Rounds hit the ground around him, raising red craters in dead flesh behind his feet. He had an axe, its head a chest-wide span of black iron, its cutting edge curved like a skull's smile. I remember it singing in the air. The axe hit me in the side. It cut deep.

I remember the pain, star bright, and ice cold. I bled, red liquid running over red armour, over gold, red drooling onto the ground. I looked up as the warrior pulled his axe back. Blood fell from the blade edge. It glittered in the sun, crimson against the blue sky.

I put him down then, I shot him until he was broken armour and folds of meat. I killed him before death could take me. I remember that I felt anger and joy at that moment, but I do not know why.

The memory fades. I am alone again. I have a shape. It is a shape like that of a man, but I am hollow. I am just the outline. I have hands, but cannot touch. I have no mouth, but I have been screaming since I began my fall. I want to breathe, but I cannot. I cannot remember what it is to breathe; only what it is to drown in an abyss, to sink without hitting the bottom.

Time passes. I can feel it passing, like wind burying a statue in sand.

I had a name once. It is an echo, fading but never vanishing, forever beyond hearing. I was once flesh, but that is gone.

+Helio Isidorus.+

The voice comes to me out of the black night. I know the name, but I do not remember why.

I remember fire. It was white, the stark white of a sun's heart. It roared from a black sky and remade me.

I fell to my hands and knees. The ground beneath me was red dust, the colour of rust, the colour of dried blood. Pain, hotter and sharper than any wound, filled me. I could not see; the fire took my eyes first, and then it took my tongue before I could scream.

Inside my armour my muscles bunched, straining against metal. The fire burned through me, blistering my skin. I felt mouths open across my body, a thousand mouths each with razor teeth, each babbling a plea for the pain to stop. The fire pulled through my body like hands through wet clay.

I was suffocating, as if sinking in sand. The acid touch of panic burnt my flesh. I could not breathe. I could not move.

Everything stopped. It is like a razor drawn through the memory, a hard line severing me from everything that came before.

I felt nothing.

I stood slowly, the dust spilling from my armour. I begin to walk, one slow step at a time. A dull haze shrouds the world. Beside me, other shapes move. They are lumbering figures, like walking statues. Somewhere in the distance I can see a cluster of figures. Golden light outlines their shapes. They stand as if waiting. I walk towards them, towards the light. I cannot remember my name.

The memory breaks, and I spin on through the empty dark.

+Helio Isidorus.+ It is a dream voice shouting from the darkness.

I can see light. It is distant, like a moon glimpsed from beneath the waves. The light is getting brighter and closer. I am rising out of the dark. Hands that I cannot see are pulling me. I can feel fingers gripping flesh that I do not have. I try to stop. I cannot stop. The light is getting brighter and brighter; it is a sun that

I cannot look away from.

+Helio Isidorus,+ the dream voice says again. I am drowning but I cannot breathe. I thrash my arms. Cold metal holds me still. I am a swirl of dust rattling in a skin of metal.

+Helio Isidorus,+ says the voice that is a thought.

I know the name.

+Helio Isidorus.+

It is my name.

I can see.

The world is movement, and fire, and the roar of distant sounds. I am standing on a plain of leaping fire and melting snow. Beside me is a figure. He wears armour the blue of the desert sky, and his helm rises into a high crest of lapis and gold. Silk robes flutter around him, though there is no wind. Golden light glows from him, filling my eyes. He is more real than anything else I can see. It is his voice that called me from my sleep; I know this but do not know why. He turns and points. I step forwards. I have a weapon in my hands. I see an armoured warrior moving towards us. His armour is the grey of storm clouds. I fire. Blue trails of flame find the grey warrior, and he staggers to his knees before he burns. I am moving forwards, turning my eyes on the world around me. Other figures in blue armour advance beside me; we move as one.

There are more grey warriors moving towards me. They are tall, but hunched with speed. I see axes, and swords, and grey armour painted with bright colours in jagged patterns. I see black pupils in wide yellow eyes. They shout as they come. I can hear them. I can understand them. They are screaming for vengeance.

A blow strikes my shoulder. There is a cut in the metal of my armour, a dark gash through metal to the black void within. I feel nothing. The cut glows; it breeds green maggots of light, and then closes like a silenced mouth. I turn my head. I see a warrior pulling back his blade from another strike. His face is bare and his beard is wet and red with blood. A cut runs across his face from temple to cheek. I can see white bone in the open lips of the wound. He is a pace from me. I do not know how he got so close.

I fire. My weapon is low and the rounds tear the warrior's legs off in a blaze that burns even after he falls. His flesh begins to cook inside his armour.

I take a pace forwards, stepping through the flames. I pause. Memories swirl in the darkness within my skin, rattling like sand against bronze. I watch the grey warrior burn, become ash, become dust. I know this should mean something, but

in my memory there is only the emptiness that drowns all else. I am an outline held in a dream of falling, and this moment means nothing.



HAND OF DUST

The dust blows from my hand towards a far horizon. I watch it turn on the wind. My mind can feel every particle of it, can taste the bone, metal and flesh that it once was. I can hear the dead in the dust's soft touch. For a second I think I recognise a voice, but then it becomes just the soft rattle of dust against my armour. The sun is setting. The sky is a pyre of molten colour. The wind shivers close to my skin. It has a voice of thirst and whispers. I look down to where the dust has heaped against the charred remnants of a building. This is the place where everything began, and everything ended. I thought I would never return here, but here I stand and wait and watch the dust dancing on the wind and I remember. I am Ahzek Ahriman, exiled son of Magnus the Red, destroyer of my Legion, and I remember.

I remember red. The red was the blood gloss of armour under the high sun. A warrior crouched before me on the polished, white stone. Ivory edged his armour and symbols curled in silver on the polished plates. He was trembling as though from a chill.

'Helekphon?' I said slowly. He did not move.

I shifted half a pace forward. Deep, laboured breaths buzzed from the vox-link.

'Brother?' I tried again. Nothing. Just the trembling and the hiss-sigh of breath and static.

+Helekphon?+ I sent.

His head snapped up. Blank eye pieces met mine. The trembling stopped. He had gone very still. I shifted my grip on my boltgun. I could feel his eyes follow

the movement.

+Ahriman?+ he sent, his voice a crushed whisper of thought.

+I am here.+

+Please...+ The thought was a moan. It tasted of desperation, of the last breath of life. +You have never... seen this before... have you? You were not on Bezant... or Clorphor.+

He paused and I felt the dull echo of his panic as his will slipped. +You have heard... but have not seen. This is our curse, boy. This is our fate. You should have killed me when it began. Do it now, before...+

His thought drained away, and the hiss of his breath rose in my ears again.

+Brother I cann—+ I began, but never finished the thought.

Helekphon's head wrenched back and he screamed to the noon sky. His shape distorted. Armour shrieked as it tore apart. Wet flesh expanded out of the cracks. Blind eyes rolled in the branching mass of blood-slicked flesh. Claws and hands reached down, slapping on the stone floor as the flesh that had been Helekphon pulled itself from the cracked shell of his armour.

I fired. I fired again and again, until the firing pin clacked on an empty chamber. Then I stood for a long time, looking at the blood and pulped flesh glinting red under the sun.

The memory slides away with the dust, becoming small and distant as I watch. I breathe. I can still smell the blood. The wind and the dust rise from my hand.

I remember water. The water was black and still, like a mirror waiting for light. The still surface shattered as my hand scooped up a palm of water to my mouth. It tasted of pollution and chemicals, and life allowed to rot out of the sight of the sun. I took another mouthful and gulped it down. My mouth was still dry.

Where am I? I thought, as though the question alone would bring an answer. I looked up. There were stars in the sky, but their light did not reflect from the water's mirror. A swirl of colour lay across the blackness like a stain of rot blossoming on a bandaged wound.

'The Eye of Terror still holds me then,' I said to myself as I looked down from the bruised night. A world of leaping flames and broken stone extended away from me on all sides. Somewhere in the distance gunfire chattered and rippling detonations smudged the horizon. My armour hung from me, blackened as though by fire. My shattered staff lay beside me, still smoking. I closed my eyes and saw again the face of Magnus, and felt the roar of the warp as I tumbled away from that face.

Banishment: the last word spoken by my father, the word which followed me as I had fallen through the warp. Seconds had become years and years seconds. I had passed through fire, light and ice so bright it was blinding. All the while the last word spoken to me by my father had followed me, and with it the fact that the Rubric had failed – that I had failed.

Pride – last of sins – it finds us in the end. Always.

I reached for more water and saw the figures watching me. I should have sensed them approaching, should have heard their thoughts and read the paths of their next moments before they reached me. But I did not. My mind was a dull stone in my skull.

There were five of them. Their armour was the ochre of dried bone. Their weapons glinted in the light of the Eye above. I stared at them, my hand halfway to my mouth, the water draining between my fingers. They looked at me for a long moment, and then one spoke in a voice like gristle cracking between teeth.

‘Who are you, who comes to our realm?’

Who am I? I thought.

I am Ahriman, came a thought that sounded like a distant shout fading into the distance.

Banishment. The word rang clear and fresh through my mind. I looked down at my hand. The water had drained away.

I am failure, I thought. I am the sinner chained to life for his hubris while all he valued became dust.

I looked up.

‘I am Horkos,’ I said.

The memory fades. The sun is setting in a final glimmer of red fire.

I am still banished, I am still an exile, but I am no longer broken by the burden of the past.

I see fading light. The last rays of the red sun catch the motes of dust as they spread through the air. I see the future in their dust dance. Possibilities and unborn fates spin before my eyes, each one a universe that shall live, or shall remain unborn. I see worlds burn, and ashes become the beds of the children of humanity. I see all that was, and I see how it may end. I see hope. We will rise again. Salvation will come, even if it takes ten thousand years.

The sun has set, and this dead land of ashes and dust is an ocean of black velvet beneath my feet. I let my hand fall, and watch with my mind as the last of the

scattered dust settles with the night. I turn. Behind me a sea of eyes glow bright in armoured faces. They wait, silent, watching.

‘Come, my brothers,’ I say. ‘It is time.’



KING OF ASHES

Someone is calling me. I feel his voice pull me to wakefulness. How long has it been? Cold darkness surrounds me, unbroken by the beat of a heart, or the hiss of breath. How long have I slept? Why can't I see? I try to look around, but there is nothing to turn through, no light to break the blackness. I could be falling. I could be tumbling over and over without realising.

Who am I? The question echoes, and is lost in silence.

What am I?

Then I remember. I remember what I was, and the first time I glimpsed what I would become.

I remember gold. A golden web of glowing threads, spreading through the black, stretching into infinity. The threads split and divided, met and joined, over and over, slicing the emptiness into sharp slivers. I spun through the web. My body blinked between shapes: a silver hawk, a circle of fire, a sickle of moonlight. Rainbow sparks danced in my wake, and the golden web sang at my passing. I felt joy. I had made that journey many times in dreams before that moment, but that was the first time I had dived into the Great Ocean at my own will. It felt like breaking into air after drowning. It felt like returning home. I flew, my thoughts stretching across time and space, my will snapping realities and remaking them. It was so easy, it was like nothing, but it was everything.

They came for me then.

I felt them before I saw them. They cackled with voices of cracking ice. The golden web became fractures running through a plain of obsidian. I fell and hit

the black glass. My shape became that of a human, hard-muscled and black-haired. I stood, and turned my single eye to the shadows which crawled above the ground. Cold poured over me. I tasted blood, hot and spiced. Laughter breathed across the idea of my skin...

None of what I saw or felt was physically real – it was all metaphor, a shadow play projected onto the curtain of the aether. But unkind dreams can burn deeper than true fire.

A wolf stepped from behind the darkness. Blood matted its pelt and hung in droplets from its teeth. Scars marked its muzzle and twisted between eyes the colour of molten brass. Those eyes did not leave mine as it paced forwards. Breath panted from its open mouth, and I felt rage and hunger in each exhalation. It began to circle. I thought I heard laughter in the click of its claws.

+What are you?+ I asked. The wolf growled, jaws snapping out and back, faster than a blink of lightning. I felt the tips of its teeth brush the skin of my face. Pain detonated inside me at the touch. The obsidian beneath my feet shattered and I plunged down, through into the oblivion below.

The wolf was all around me, circling like a hurricane-force wind. I pushed against its presence with all my strength, but the storm swallowed my power. Its hate surrounded me, hot and red, but even as its teeth ripped me I could feel that it was sparing me, that it was holding itself back. I was not afraid. I had always known that there were creatures in the Great Ocean, things that call it home just as I do. Old things, formed from mislaid thoughts and stranded dreams, dangerous, cruel. They had always seemed to ignore me. Until that moment.

I hit another glass plain, and pulled myself to my feet. Aetheric blood was sheeting down the idea of my skin. The wolf was circling again, but it was not alone. Three other shapes stood beyond the wolf. A serpent glided and coiled across the black glass, its scales changing colour with each stretch and squeeze of its body. There was something soft and obscene about its every movement, like the taste of vomit made solid. It reared up and looked at me with a human face. Its features were perfect in every way. I knew as I looked back that it saw everything I had ever hidden from anyone or anything. It licked its lips, the hood of scales flaring behind its smiling face. Behind it hovered a thing like a rotten moth with the cataract-white eyes of a dead fish. Its thorax shuddered as it expanded and contracted, phlegm popping and rattling with each breath. There was another shape further away, indistinct, yet I was sure that it had had its back turned to me. The wolf circled nearer, and the snake glided in its wake.

+I know what this is,+ I said, and there was laughter in my thought-voice. Even

now, with all that has happened and all that I am, the foolishness of those words makes me shiver. +I know what you are.+

The wolf paused. I could see the blood-clotted fur on its back rise into serrated spikes. The snake laughed, and the moth buzzed its wings. I did not respond. I was sure, so sure that I understood.

+The bloody wolf, which represents destruction from within. The serpent, which is the temptation to turn aside. The spectre of the grave, which is the fear of failure. You are my weaknesses come to pull me back to the dark. The seeker of truth must face you all if he is to ascend, but you are nothing more than reflections, and I do not fear you.+

'Is that what you seek?' said a voice. It was quiet, but it shook with different sounds, as though stitched together from many voices. The wolf went still, and the serpent hissed but did not move. The rotting moth buzzed backwards. The hunched creature at the edge of the circle turned and looked at me. It had the head of an eagle, a crow and a vulture stacked one above the other. Its eyes burned gas-flame blue. 'Is the truth why you are here?' It paused, savouring its next word. 'Magnus.' The words chilled me. The creature should not know my name. It should not know me. 'Oh, but how could I not know you, my son?' it said.

+No,+ I said. +You are not my father.+

The four creatures laughed with a crackle of bones and a rustle of feathers. Their shadows grew, crawling towards me. Their hunger was all around me, pressing close, churning like waves against my mind. Then, suddenly – so suddenly that I felt their absence as a cold shock – they were gone. I was alone, surround by nothing but silence.

Where had they gone? Why had they gone? The answer came, clear out of the silence. They had fled. And that meant that the silence was a lie.

I was not alone.

I felt it then: the presence in the emptiness, vast and so bright that I could not see it.

+Why are you here?+ I asked. When the answer came it echoed through my being.

+I have been searching for you,+ it said, +my son.+

I open the idea of my mouth to answer, but the memory is gone and I am falling again, trying to remember if I answered, or if in that moment I was, for the first time, afraid.

The memory has gone but it has given me part of myself.

I am a son.

A son...

I remember earth. The earth was red, it rose in dry ribbons on the wind. He stood before me, his armour powdered by dust and marked by fire. His brothers stood beside him: Amon with his head bowed, Tolbek, his face blanked by shock, and the others. My sons. My defiant sons. My murderous children. So clever, so gifted and so blind.

Ahriman stared back at me. He knew what he had done; I could see the truth haloing him like black smoke around a flame. He had defied me, he had wielded the fire of the gods to remake the present, and he had failed.

I turned and looked at what my son had left of my Legion. Thousands of blank eyes stared back at me from the helms of motionless suits of armour. I could see the soul caught in each one, held like smoke in a bottle, drowning in oblivion, dead yet not gone.

Rage. Even now the memory shakes me. Our anger is not the anger of mortals. It is the lightning bolt which breaks the high tower – the hammer blow which shakes the heavens.

I looked back to Ahriman, to my son, the best of my sons. We spoke, but the words held no meaning. There could be only one answer for what he had done.

+Banishment.+ I spoke the word, and the word remade the world.

Ahriman was gone.

My son is gone. I remain. Falling. It is he that is calling me, back to the world of mud and flesh. I see his face as I fall from the cradle of gods. Was it a memory of what has been, or is it yet to come? Is there a difference?

I am not what I was. I am not even a fraction of what I was.

I am the broken son of a false god.

I am dust.

I am time scattering from the hand to be blown on the wind of fate.

I am the whisperings of the dead, forever cascading into the grave.

I am the king of all I see.

I open my eye. Reality screams around me as it rushes and tumbles past. Time surrounds me, scattering and gathering me. Once I would have thought this power, but it is not; it is a prison.

There are shapes in the tempest: faces, towers and plains of dust, possibilities waiting to be seen, to be made real. I can decide to make them real, or to make

them fade. I can slip back into the dark silt of dreams that might not be dreams. I choose to let them become real. My throne builds itself from shadow. The boiling sky and dry red plain congeal and harden above and below me. I still have no form besides a jagged line of golden light which hangs above the throne like frozen lightning. Then the tower splits the ground beneath me, and thrusts me up into the air. Other towers shimmer into sight as I rise, a great forest of obsidian, silver and brass. I look, and see through the veils of matter, see the weave and flow of the aether beneath. It has been a long time since I have taken my throne, an age in which empires could die and be forgotten. For the half mortal creatures which dwell in the towers, though, I have been absent for no more than a turning of one of this planet's nine suns.

My remaining sons are waiting for me. They kneel, high-crested helms dipping, silk robes rustling in the wind. Each of them sees me differently. I know this, though I cannot know what it is that they see – that insight is denied me. Perhaps they see me as I was when I was half mortal: copper-skinned, red-maned, and crowned by horns. Perhaps they see only a shadow cast across my throne as though by a flickering fire. Perhaps they see something else.

Knekku raises his head first, and the questions begin to form in his thoughts. What is my bidding?

+The exiles are returning,+ I send. I feel their shock, their anger, and their hope.
+*He* is returning, and war is coming with him.+

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John French has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, the novel *Tallarn: Ironclad*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile*, *Ahriman: Sorcerer* and *Ahriman: Unchanged*, plus a number of related short stories collected in *Ahriman: Exodus*, including 'The Dead Oracle' and 'Hand of Dust'. Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella *Fateweaver*, plus many short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

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