



A COIN FOR THE CARRION THIEVES

A THOUSAND SONS SHORT STORY

JOHN FRENCH

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About the Author

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A COIN FOR THE CARRION THIEVES

By John French

'All wealth begins with possessing what others lack.'

– ancient axiom of commerce

I am called Ctesias. I am a sorcerer. I am a peddler of lies and a breaker of oaths. I am a gene-son of Magnus the Red. I am a brother of fools and a destroyer of kingdoms, and I am old... Not just old in years, though thousands on thousands of years have passed since I was human. No... To be old is to see the universe clearly without the comfort of the falsehoods we drape over reality. The young see hope and possibility, but the old see only foolishness and inevitable ruin. The young see the chance for redemption, for renewal, but the old know that the sins of the past are always with us, sitting on our shoulder, a watching shadow that we can never look at. To be old is to know that the past is irredeemable, and that the future is damned. I know this; I have had it taught to me over and again. Yet still I persist, as I have for all the millennia of my stolen lives. I persist and follow fools, and so make myself the greatest fool of all.

And that is what I did when I chose to stay with Ahriman after the disaster of our return to the Planet of the Sorcerers. We had broken the banishment of Magnus to try and cast the Rubric for a second time. The purpose, just as with the first attempt, was to restore the Thousand Sons to what they had been – free of the mutation and restored to true life. Ahriman had been certain that this endeavour would work and so we, just as we had done the first time, followed him into failure.

We fled from the Planet of the Sorcerers, exiles again. Why the wrath of Magnus did not follow us, I do not know. Perhaps the creature who had once been our teacher and gene-sire had thought that our failure was punishment enough. Perhaps some greater, daemonic will had shackled his hand. This, like many truths, is one that I have no desire to know.

The power and might that Ahriman had assembled and wielded to make his attempt to cast the second Rubric had been vast. We had drawn the scattered exiles of the Thousand Sons to us, bound legions of daemons to us, and dragged with us a horde that wanted nothing more than to feed on the ascendant star of Ahriman's power. In failure, all fled, save a few. The Circle and many of their vassals remained with a handful of ships. The rest, living and Neverborn alike, vanished. We were a wounded, ragged remnant trying to outrun the storm we feared followed us. I say we, because, like the fool that time has made me, I remained.

We came to rest, at last, beside the Weeping Crones. The laws of reality are not simply broken in the Eye; they are mocked. The Weeping Crones had been stars, each burning at the centre of its own system. Those worlds had once been part of the great and fallen realm of the alien aeldari, but the immaterium and the whims of lost dreams had withered the light of the stars and dragged them from their settings to spiral together. Now they danced together, the pull and clash of their gravities suspended. They wept ghost light, great long streamers of light the colour of pus seeping from a sore. Shapes moved in their pale faces, dead faces formed from curdling plasma and fading light. On the worlds that still circled them, there were tribes of three-eyed druids, who looked up at those blighted suns until they went blind, one eye at a time. While their eyes regrew, they etched accounts of what they had seen onto the shard remains of aeldari cities, which lay in great, flat plains: endless words of revelation in countless languages. All nonsense – take it from me. It was a vile place of slow entropy and pointless despair, but to us, wounded and bleeding and running, it was sanctuary.

+He has summoned you,+ Lycomedes sent. He stood by the entrance to my chambers. Fully armoured, his mind flaring and shifting like a crackling fire. +The Carrion Thieves have come.+

'Use your voice,' I replied softly, without looking up from the skull I was turning over in my hands. 'There are things in here you do not want your

thoughts to disturb.’

Smoke rose as the marks burnt into the skull’s surface rewrote themselves. The two daemons bound into it were fighting each other and against their bonds. They wanted to be free. I was not unsympathetic to their instincts.

I felt Lycomedes’ pride flare, the mingling of uncertainty and ambition battling against his control. He was one of Gaumata’s, one of the unclaimed, those whose powers and knowledge were modest at best before Ahriman had cast the Rubric but had somehow been spared the transmutation into Rubricae. Compared to the sorcerers, witches and psykers of other Legions, he was powerful, but amongst us his abilities were those of a child. An ambitious, vicious child, who deep down knew that he would likely never rise high, and so hungered all the more for ascendancy. I despised him, and those like him, not because of his ambition, but because he embodied the blindness that had damned us in the first place. That may surprise you – after all, I am a sorcerer whose speciality is the binding and command of daemons, and I have pursued power and knowledge all my long life. I just have never thought it made me anything other than a broken and vile thing. Say what you like about me, and many have, but I rarely lie, even to myself.

‘Ahriman summons you.’

‘And he sent you, Lycomedes? What new sin have I committed that he should punish me so?’

I glanced at Lycomedes. He wore the blue lacquered armour that was common to our kind, and the gorget rose and curled behind his head like the caul of a cobra. Psycho-conductive crystals gleamed on the hood. His face was thin, and had that focused hardness about the brow, mouth and jaw. His eyes were green without white or pupil. Gold sigils wound across his temples. A long-hafted khopesh sat at his back.

‘Tell me,’ I said, still not rising from where I sat. ‘Do you consider it a punishment or an honour to be sent to me like a crow with a message in its beak?’

He did not answer, but another flare of anger and pride rose from his mind. He was not even trying to control the bleed of his thoughts. I felt some of my captives tug at their bindings – they could smell Lycomedes’ soul. A rope of finger bones and human hair rattled on its hook in the ceiling. Coals glowed from red to orange in a brazier in which a pitted bronze dagger sat.

Frost formed on the surface of an obsidian mirror lying on a copper plinth. I spoke words in my mind and felt them soothe and lash the daemons in each object back to silence.

‘Careful,’ I said, and whispered more silent-words to the rune-marked skull as I placed it back in its cold-iron box. ‘I know that Gaumata does not value knowledge of the arts of summoning, binding, evocation and dismissal in his disciples, but I would hope that simple self-preservation would make you keep your emotions and thoughts in check.’

‘I do not follow exalted Gaumata,’ he said stiffly, and now I let my mind taste and hear more of the emotion that was spicing the ether around him. Shame – beneath the anger was a pearl of shame, hard and dark in his being.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘He broke your discipleship, and so now you find yourself a messenger without a master.’

I rose and looked around the chamber. It was a storeroom, or laboratory you might say if you wanted to drain it of all poetry. To this day, it is here I keep the Neverborn that I have tricked and trapped: things made from pain, or spite, or sorrow; things that burn and deceive and murder; things that leave parents weeping over small graves; and things that spool the last breath from the mouths of those who want to live. There are Neverborn here who would flay your mind a thought at a time over a thousand years and you would never realise it until your existence is someone you do not know calling a name you do not remember. Of course, it is not where I keep my greatest treasures – those prisons are stronger and far from tangible.

I picked up my staff and walked over to Lycomedes. The parchments pinned to my armour rustled.

‘We should go without more delay,’ I said. ‘I would hate to leave our betters waiting for our presence longer than necessary.’

‘I have delivered the summons,’ said Lycomedes. ‘I am not summoned to attend.’

‘Oh, but you are,’ I said. I think I may have even tried a smile. ‘Will you follow?’ I asked.

After a moment he made his choice and followed.

Ahriman, Lycomedes and I stood in the hangar of the *Word of Hermes* and watched as a bloated gunship settled onto the deck. Its skin was a

patchwork of metals and repair methods worn with what struck me as pride. Behind the gunship, the open doors of the hangar bay framed a school of warships hanging in the void, the view shimmering behind void shield layers. Clouds of dust and debris gathered around their hulls, which gleamed like brushed steel or polished bone. A great swarm of lesser craft spun around them, moving like a murmuration of birds above a watering hole. Or a slaughter field.

Lycomedes stood at my side. His thoughts were controlled now, held in check by caution and uncertainty as to why he was here, beside myself and our ultimate lord, Ahzek Ahriman, to greet our guests.

The gunship's doors unfolded and spilled a menagerie of metal and flesh into the light. There were towering things, hung with skeins of chain; figures in armour the colour of discoloured bronze; and things that limped, balancing their weight on powerblades taller than they were, things whose nature and provenance I could not divine.

They called themselves the Discordia, or sometimes the Faithful Followers of the False Concordance of All Things, but to all others they were the Carrion Thieves. In the ruthless war for resources in the Eye of Terror, they were scavenger-traders of lost ships, and that calling made them powerful. You see, in the Eye, where dreams can be real, the material is precious. I can sit at the heart of a cyclone of etheric power at the core of a lightless star and push my thoughts and wishes out until they swim through the night like bright fish through clear water. A soul with enough will can conjure cities that spiral between planets, worlds that are ribbons of gold and sunlight, chariots that can cross the gulf between endless false heavens. Some do just that, but these wonders are not real. Like the daemons that swim the Great Ocean, they drown in reality. The warp cannot really make anything. For those that wish to make war, they must have weapons made in cold reality. Such things are hard to come by in the Eye, and so we are all scavengers and wielders of the weapons of the past.

That is what Ahriman needed. We needed supplies. We needed weapons and ore, and metal and bullets, and we needed ships. We had left the Planet of the Sorcerers wounded and weakened, and there would be those who would come after us for vengeance or fortune. That was why we had come to the Weeping Crones: not just because we hoped that their poisonous nature would cloud our scent from anyone pursuing us, but because it was

one of the places where the Carrion Thieves gathered and fished the depths of night for the carcasses of the Eye's eternal wars.

A single figure broke from the herd of creatures and came forwards. It walked on legs of tarnished brass. A great mane of mechanical tentacles writhed from its back. Chains of broken weaponry and machinery hung from it. Bones of all shapes clinked on metal threads. I thought I recognised the lines of Legion warplate in its shape, but it lay so submerged under accretions of detritus that I could not be sure if it was its original form. I kept my will dimmed, but even brushing against its mind I could feel layers of hardened scarring and deliberate thought mutilation that felt like metal thorns. Only one emotion bled from between the cracks: hunger – raw, cold hunger, like the gaping mouth of a void between galaxies. A hooded cloak of scorched metal scales hid the bulk of its body, and it looked down at us with clusters of eye-lenses.

‘Ahriman...’ it said, and I confess I was surprised. The voice was deep, melodious, and almost human. ‘Son of the King Who is Crimson, Exiled and Returned, you have come to our harvesting ground and are welcome. I am called The First to Gather, and Bountiful Lord to those that are of my bond. I say again you are welcome.’

The thing called The First to Gather bowed then, tilting down and spreading its arms. It held the pose. I noticed that the arms were flesh rather than machine, and very long. The nails on the fingers were black and the length of knives.

Ahriman inclined his head.

‘You do us honour, and I see and know that those who are of your bond are right to call you bountiful.’ The First to Gather rose, its arms folding back into itself. ‘As is right for one who comes in friendship, I bring tokens to feed those who have need.’

Further down the hull of the *Word of Hermes*, cargo hold doors opened. Broken war machines tumbled into the void: the torn shells of Predators, gunships, Rhinos, and with them the corpses of mortals. Fragments of metal, shell casings and severed limbs tumbled over in the weak light of the Weeping Crones.

The First to Gather rose, extending in height as it watched the cascade of war wreckage spread out in the void. Its eyes rotated and lit with inner fire. A single, long-nailed hand appeared from under its cloak and made a sign

in the air which set the wards inked on my skin itching.

‘It is well,’ said The First to Gather, compressing its form again. ‘Fresh from death. Still marked with the blood of both sides... A worthy giving.’ It turned and lights flashed in its eyes.

The crowd of creatures at the other side of the deck turned and scuttled into curious huddles. Out in the void I saw hundreds of small craft swarm forwards. Melta torches flared, portioning wreckage. Hooks and cables snagged pieces and hauled them away. Nets dragged through the void, catching fragments and body parts.

‘You may remain as our guests until you wish to resume your path.’ The First to Gather was turning away and scuttling after its companions as Ahriman spoke.

‘We wish for ships,’ he said.

The First to Gather turned back, eye-lenses whirring as they focused.

‘The giving you have made is not sufficient for what you wish,’ it said. ‘The ships you made voyage here aboard could be given, and remade craft given in return. This can be talked of, but for additional ships... the giving must be great.’

‘We have not more of this world to give,’ said Ahriman. ‘I lay before you the dead and broken that we have.’

‘Then there is nothing that you may give to feed those of my kinship and bond,’ said The First to Gather, ‘and nothing to discuss.’

‘Not all that we can give can be held in the hand,’ said Ahriman.

‘Of this there is no doubt, Ahriman of the Paths That are Numbered Nine, but we do not give what we remake in exchange for the ephemera of dreams and sorcery. We value what can be held in the hand, what can be eaten and remade. I do not wish you an enemy, Great Sorcerer Son of the Cyclops, but we have endured the displeasure of great enemies.’

‘You speak truth,’ said Ahriman, ‘but there is still something we may offer that you can touch and hold, and I think you will find it greater than all the broken swords we might lay at your feet.’

The First to Gather turned and moved its head as though trying to see Ahriman from different sides.

‘What giving might you propose?’

Ahriman turned to me then.

+You wish me to dance for them now?+ I sent, not bothering to keep the

edge of tiredness from my thought.

+I wish you to help us recover from what has befallen us, brother,+ he replied. His sending was so smooth and controlled – no edge, no command, just balanced reasonableness. That is the thing about Ahriman, his greatest strength is not the power he wields, nor is it his ruthlessness in his pursuit of false hope. No, it is that he is always reasonable. I can think of no better reason to loathe him.

I turned to The First to Gather. I am, as some might call it, a daemonologist. The powers I wield are those of summoning and binding. They are not the tricks of petty conjurers; they are the wielding of damnation by word and will. Still, there are times when a little of the theatrical can help, too.

I took the coin from a pouch at my waist. It was silver and a dead man had minted it in the last hour of his life. A king looked out from one face, a beast in the shape of a half-bull half-man on the other. I tossed it into the air. The coin struck the deck and began to spin, its twin faces flicking around faster and faster, beast and king blurring. Within my mind, I formed the first of a string of formulae. The sounds of syllables from lost languages overlapped in my inner ear. Memories surfaced and arranged like links of a chain.

Some of the Carrion Thieves started forwards as the smell of burning spices and salt filled the air. Guns appeared. Charge coils glowed. Autoloaders cycled.

‘Stillness...’ said The First to Gather, raising a hand but not looking up from the spinning coin. The Carrion Thieves froze.

The coin rose into the air. Smoke coiled from it. Within my mind, the chains of thought pulled the first syllables of a name onto my tongue. Black smoke billowed out from the coin and curdled to fire. An impression of horns and eyes and fangs formed in the cloud. I could taste ashes, gritty in my mouth as I spoke the next pieces of the daemon’s name. The fire within the cloud flared bright. The deck where the coin had struck was melting. A mouth spread wide in the smoke. Teeth of white-hot flame framed a scream that only I could hear. I spoke the last syllable. The fire and smoke exploded outwards, and then rushed back in.

There was a moment of perfect stillness, ringing with ultrasonic shrieks.

A figure hovered in the air. Fire flowed under its skin. Soot and blood fell

from it, burning to nothing before it touched the ground. It was lean, a thing of taut predator muscle. Swords of glowing iron hung in its hands, blood dripping from their edges. Spikes of bone projected from its curved spine. A crown of melting brass circled its head between black antlers. It smiled at the world with a mouth of iron needles and furnace fire.

I held my thoughts steady in my mind. The daemon was not moving but I could feel its fury as it thrashed against my will. It was a herald of the one of slaughter. Cruelty in murder was its nature and its parent. It was an impressive thing, but in truth a minor treasure in my collection. Still, it made the point. Behind me, I heard Lycomedes shift as the reek of cooking meat and sulphur washed over us.

The First to Gather circled the daemon, eye-lenses refocusing.

‘Impressive, but this thing will drain away. It is a shade of war, but still only a dream.’

In my mind, occult formulae and prepared cyphers uncoiled and yanked the daemon’s essence back into imprisonment. It billowed up and out, its false substance dissolving as it tried to cling on to reality. Then it contracted, became a black-and-fire-red line and was gone. The coin spun in the air and then fell towards the deck. I caught it, feeling the malice boil inside, and then placed it in Ahriman’s outstretched hand. He held it up between forefinger and thumb.

‘Power held in my hand,’ he said, ‘but *this* is not the coin I offer you. For what we need the giving must be greater. Not a lesser Neverborn bound to a bauble but something magnificent bound into the greatest of weapons.’

For a second The First to Gather did not answer, and I felt the hunger in that silence. Its machine legs clicked, and its head twitched.

This was the bargain that we... that *Ahriman* was making: that I would bind a greater daemon into a war engine of the Carrion Thieves, and for that they would give us ships.

‘It is acceptable,’ said The First to Gather.

+Place the teeth according to the Cordula progression,+ I sent.

Lycomedes reached into the amphora with his mind and pulled a cloud of pale teeth into the air. They spread out, forming a flattened disc in the still air of the observatory. I felt the eddies in the Great Ocean flex minutely as his mind formed an image of the required geometry and his will then

pushed it into being. The disc of floating teeth formed the pattern, each one tumbling with an individually imparted momentum. It was impressive. Lycomedes might have been an overambitious fool but the telekinetic skills he had learnt as a one-time initiate of the Raptora were considerable.

The teeth settled to the floor. Beneath them, the rayed-skull symbol of the dead Imperium's new religion looked up at the crystal dome above. It, and the observatory it decorated, were surprisingly well preserved. The ship we stood in had been a warship in the service of the so-called Ecclesiarchy, the cult of the false God-Emperor's divinity in the Imperium. A catastrophe in the form of a crew mutiny had seen it fail in battle. Wounded, it had bled the last of its atmosphere before tumbling into the Great Ocean. Its crew had become soul feed for lesser Neverborn, and it had fallen and whirled until the currents of the immaterium had vomited it into one of the flotsam drifts within the Eye. The Carrion Thieves had found it and dragged it to their feeding ground in the Weeping Crones. They had patched its wounds with the skin of other wrecks and grafted new reactors into its heart. It was ready to make war again. The *Purity of Flame* the Imperium had called it, and the Carrion Thieves had kept the name, just as they had left the symbols of the ridiculous religion that had inspired it. I might have suspected that they relished the profanity were they any other group, but in their case I suspected they did not even consider it – the name was just another intact component taken from the midden, like a tattoo on the skin of a corpse, or the shape of a gun barrel.

Lycomedes turned and looked at me as the last tooth spun to stillness on the floor.

+What now?+ he asked. I could feel his resentment at the use I had put him to. For three days, three hours and three minutes we had moved through the empty bowels of the *Purity of Flame*, marking decks and walls with blood and water and salt. We had scattered the ashes of three hundred and seven mortals. I had spoken words of power aloud and in my mind. He had understood none of it, though he thought he did: another quality that many of Magnus' gene-sons share – the inability to believe that we are ignorant.

Finally, we had prepared the locus for ritual. At the top of a high minaret on the *Purity of Flame*'s back, I had traced unseen geometry through the air, geometry that smouldered in the ether. We had scattered the blood of

mortals who had died by deceit, lit bowls of oil rendered from the fat of executed monarchs, and set the ground with the teeth of beasts. Each detail aligned and resonated in the immaterium, each act and feature setting up ripples of intent and meaning that added to and altered each other. Now, all that remained was to drop the final stone into the pool.

Lycomedes turned to look at me from where he stood on the other side of the domed chamber. Blue armour, high-crested helm, mind filled with the lore of ages but eyes blind to where he stood or why. As has been proved again and again, we are blind as to our failings and doomed to repeat them.

+Now we begin,+ I sent to him, and struck the stone floor with my staff.

My mind spoke the capstone syllable of the ritual that I had been preparing since before Lycomedes had come to my chambers. Others, even others of my gene-kin, might raise up the Neverborn by ritual, by signs and glyphs and formulae, and think that such things begin and end with the opening of the grimoire and the first sigil marked on the floor. The truth is that everything – every act, every word, every detail – from the moment you set out on such a course is ritual. Everything has significance.

The immaterium blazed. Alignments of objects, words, thoughts and action connected and lit, drawing power to them, feeding each other, until the patterns I had created in the warp were a vast, sculpted inferno. The *Purity of Flame* screamed. Black ice grew on its bones. Metal glowed cherry red. The echoes of the dead howled through its empty spaces. Up and out in the unseen realm, the fire shone. To the eyes of the Neverborn it was a signal, an invitation, a promise.

Lycomedes juddered as the cyclone of power surrounded him. I could feel his shock, and then the realisation.

+What are you doing?+ he shouted with his mind as he tried to step towards me. Frost was forming on his armour. A servo blew out in his right knee joint as the telekinetic forces holding him tightened.

+There must be an offering in a summoning, Lycomedes,+ I replied. +Unwilling, ignorant if possible, flawed yet powerful. Once, the magi and druids would have burnt princes to bring jinn or angels to their ritual circles. You are no prince, but you are a son of the Crimson King, and so you will serve.+

+You are a betrayer!+ he shouted with all his hatred, and within the immaterium the fire of the ritual caught the truth of his words and leapt

higher.

+We are all betrayers in the end,+ I sent to him, and spoke the name that I had prepared for this moment.

Names have power. Some of the ancients believed that everything had a name, from each blade of grass to the birds that flew in the sky above. Incredibly, their belief is true. Everything *does* have a name, and those names shimmer across the boundary between reality and the immaterium like the ripples in still water. Know a name, speak a name and you are exerting power; you are pulling the truth of that name from the unreal into the real. To the daemons of the warp, their names are everything, a thread that links them with the ideas and dreams of reality that made them. And if you call that name, they must answer.

Lycomedes saw the daemon coming, saw with his inner sight, saw the immaterium fold and coil, saw darkness and paradox rushing down towards him from eternity. His mind hardened, as did his will, and layered him with armour made of spells of protection. They would not stop what was coming, but I confess I was impressed – now, faced with betrayal and oblivion, he was defiant.

The daemon came on, pulling a shape to itself from the fears and hope of mortals across time. Wings of fire opened, feathering the dark, multiplying into a spiral. Claws formed from the starlight of dead galaxies. Lids of night pulled back from eyes with irises of flame. The bow wave of its presence broke over the *Purity of Flame*. Distances and geometry collapsed, then reversed. In my mind, I could see the towers of great cities and hear the winds blow through their streets as they sank into dust. I could hear the words of prophets and viziers and confessors, a chorus of false promises of friendship and loyalty. I tasted the dry breath of ash blowing through the bones of dead kings, and in my mind I held firm to the last spinning coin of unspent will and intent I had prepared.

The shadow of great wings filled the chamber. The light of the stars beyond the crystal dome vanished.

+You shall burn, Ctesias!+ roared Lycomedes in defiance as the daemon's presence poured towards him, scattering feathers of golden flame into reality.

'I will,' I said aloud. 'But not yet.'

And I let the final piece of my will go. It tumbled from me. It touched the

ritual formation in the immaterium that had brought the daemon, and that vast beacon of invitation became a cage. Cords of imperative and command yanked the daemon away from Lycomedes even as it reached for his soul. It shrieked. Light vanished. The crystal dome shattered. The teeth on the floor became ash, became boiling jelly, became tiny suns of fury. The daemon fought its snare, but nothing can fight its own nature. The cords and bindings already laid into the ritual tightened and hardened as the daemon drained from the warp into the ship.

It flowed through the hull, its calls of rage now the sound of shearing metal and bursting rivets. Reactors lit and coughed blood and plasma through conduits, which were splitting and writhing like fraying rope. Stone and metal flowed together and hardened into new shapes, pillars of golden birds in flight, mirrored floors that would hold no reflection. On the daemon's essence flowed, like veins threading the yoke of an egg as the embryo within grew. This would never end now: the *Purity of Flame* would change from instant to instant as the daemon bound within it sought for a way out of its prison, and the more it tried to break free, the deeper its essence would mire itself. It would fight to preserve its prison, too, because without it there would be nothing for the daemon but oblivion. Fire and war could tear the ship's hull and it would heal. Commanded by one who held its chains, it would seek its own way through the warp like a shark. It was and would now forever be a thing of magnificent terror.

I took a coin from a pouch and touched it to the deck. It was a plain disc of copper that I had smelted myself and kept clean of any other's touch. The coin glowed with heat and when I picked it up, its surface swam with marks of claws and feathers and a cluster of blinking eyes. I put it in a pouch and moved over to Lycomedes. He was trying to rise from the deck. Claw scratches covered his armour. I saw him turn his head to look at me as I approached and heard the growl of invective in my mind. He had even thought of drawing his sword, of attacking me, but did not.

+Your emotional control is improving,+ I sent.

+You used me as bait for this summoning,+ he lashed back.

+Yes, and consider that your first real lesson – we use others or are used ourselves.+

+I have no need of your lessons,+ he sent, standing.

+I find I am in need of an apprentice,+ I sent, +and you are what I must

make do with.+

+An apprentice to you?+ The surprise was almost equal to the contempt in his sending.

+A disappointment I hope I learn to live with.+ I turned away from him, glancing up to see that the shattered dome above had been replaced with a membrane of transparent skin. +Follow, we should not keep our patrons waiting.+

After a second of hesitation he followed.

I placed the copper coin on the deck with a breath of telekinesis. The metal around it was already growing a film of ice. The First to Gather looked at it and then extended a mechanical tentacle to lift it to its eye-lenses. After a long moment, the coin vanished under its cloak.

‘The work is acceptable,’ it said. ‘For this giving you will be granted five greater craft, and nine lesser craft from those we have gathered and made whole.’

‘Your gift of plenty honours us,’ said Ahriman.

The First to Gather bowed again, spreading its dead-flesh arms, and then turning to its horde. They shambled into the mouth of their gunship, which lifted from the hangar and slid back into the void.

I turned to Ahriman.

+Fourteen ships?+ I sent. +That is more than you talked of before. Those are enough vessels to carry a war host.+

+Yes,+ he replied and began to walk away across the hangar.

+We have no such strength of numbers.+

+We shall,+ he sent.

+For what?+

Silence followed, but I did not need an answer; I could see my own answer. As at many times before and since, I wish that I had left then and not looked back. Life in all its forms is woven of regrets.

+What now?+ asked Lycomedes from behind me.

+It seems we are to begin a new war,+ I replied.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John French is the author of several Horus Heresy stories including the novels *The Solar War*, *Praetorian of Dorn*, *Tallarn* and *Slaves to Darkness*, the novella *The Crimson Fist*, and the audio dramas *Dark Compliance*, *Templar* and *Warmaster*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Resurrection*, *Incarnation* and *Divination* for The Horusian Wars and three tie-in audio dramas – the Scribe award-winning *Agent of the Throne: Blood and Lies*, as well as *Agent of the Throne: Truth and Dreams* and *Agent of the Throne: Ashes and Oaths*. John has also written the Ahriman series and many short stories.

An extract from *Arhiman: The Omnibus*.



Please don't take her. I am weak, but please don't take her from me.

The deck shook beneath Carmenta's feet as she hurried through the silence of the *Titan Child*.

I am too weak, she thought. *I deserve this, but please let me return to my child.* The deck shook again. She stumbled, hit a bare metal wall and slid to the floor. Her polished brass hands shook as she tried to pull herself up. The deck bucked and sent her sprawling. She lay for a second, watching data scroll across her green-tinted vision: the *Titan Child* was taking damage. Half of the outer belly compartments were open to the void. Fires were burning along the spinal weapon decks. Had she been on the bridge, linked to the ship, she would have felt each injury as if it were to her own body. Instead she watched the *Titan Child's* pain in a screed of impersonal data. Even then, she felt a ghost of pain in her torso as she assimilated the information.

She is bleeding, and alone. For a second she thought she felt tears run from her eyes, but her eyes had gone long ago. When separated from the ship she looked at the world through two lenses of luminous green crystal. More data scrolled across her vision. The enemy ship was close, bearing down on them like a jackal on a wounded animal.

I am going to lose you, the thought echoed through her mind. *I should not have left you. I am sorry. I am sorry. I am weak. I deserve this.*

Another part of her mind, a part that still ran with mechanical coolness, processed the data. The attacker was moving into boarding range. Their troops would be inside the hull within twenty-eight minutes.

I must get to the bridge. She extended the mechadendrites from her back and clawed her way up the passage wall until she was standing. The

cybernetic tentacles whined as she steadied herself. Something warm and wet was running down the flesh of her neck. She brought her brass hand up and ran it across her skin. Sensors in her fingers tasted the liquid: blood and oil. She moved her hand up, and found the crack running down the red lacquered ceramic of her right cheek. She felt no pain, but then the nerves in what remained of her face were long dead. *This is how a half-machine must weep*, she thought.

She took a breath, the air sucking into her lungs with a clicking of clockwork. It was an old flesh-bound habit, a sign that she was tired. She *was* tired, tired of running, tired of the life of an outcast. It had not been a good life. Too many lies and betrayals had marked her path. Part of her wanted to shut down, to let the ship die, and herself with it. She shut the thought down instead, with a snarl of anger.

You will not kill us, she shouted to herself. *You will not end this, not now. You will not take her from me.*

She dropped her hands and took an unsteady step. Sharp pain ran up her spine. She felt so tired, and a dull grey cloud was choking her senses. She had to keep moving, she had to reach the bridge. For a second she wondered where Astraeos was. She had tried to raise him but the comms link had failed. It was irrelevant anyway; if the enemy got aboard, four Space Marines would not be enough.

Slowly Carmenta began to limp down the passage, her ragged black robe trailing in her wake.

Ahzek Ahriman watched from the *Blood Crescent's* bridge as scabs of cooling armour peeled away from the silent ship's hull. The image flickered on the cracked screen, before snapping back into focus. Dozens more screens hung beside it, each showing an equally imperfect picture of the ship they were closing on. The screens gave almost the only light on the bridge, making the vast vaulted space seem small, like a cave shrunk to the sphere of light cast by a single fire. A curtain of bruise-coloured gas clouds hung across darkness in the background of each screen, and a black rift ran through those clouds like a slit pupil in a snake's eye. The stars around its edge shone with a dimmed, angry light. As he watched the ship, he could not help but feel his eyes drawn to stare into that gulf that hung in the distance. Many had given it names, but only one persisted: the Eye of

Terror.

They had found the ship by chance on the edge of an uncharted system, the energy of the warp still clinging to its hull. They had been cautious at first and fired a long-range salvo into the silent ship's flank. No answering salvo had come, no shields had ignited, and the ship's engines had remained cool. She was a warrior, a six-kilometre-long finger of granite and steel. Gun batteries nested along her flanks and jutted from her spine. But her guns had remained silent, as if she had lost the will to fight. The ship was alive, though; the *Blood Crescent's* sensors could see the brightness of her reactors still beating within her hull. They had fired one more salvo before they approached. No reply had come, and the Harrowing's hunger for the kill had begun to grow.

Machine-rigged beasts bellowed as they walked up and down the lines of slaves chained to the ship's control systems. Here and there Space Marines of the Harrowing clustered in circles around spiked altars raised in crude iron from the bridge's floor. They called themselves 'initiates', as if they had gained something by their allegiance to savagery. They were a mongrel force, the colours of a dozen forsaken identities lost under flaking layers of rust and dried blood. Strings of human teeth and finger bones rattled against their armour as they moved in time with their growled chants.

Blood pooled on the deck in places, and he heard the screams as the Harrowing impaled sacrifices on their iron altars. A few paces in front of him, Ahriman noticed one of the initiates grinning in anticipation. The Space Marine had iron hooks for teeth. The other initiates started to howl. Once, Ahriman would have felt sickened by what these Space Marines had become. Now, watching them, he felt nothing. Was he so different after all? Was he any less of a slave and betrayer than they were?

'Horkos.' The word pulled Ahriman from his thoughts. The voice was deep, a gut-rumbling purr edged with contempt. It fitted the speaker perfectly. As Ahriman looked up, he saw Gzrel stalking towards him. The lord of the Harrowing clicked and wheezed with every step, and his face was a dry mask of skin sunk into the collar of his rust-red armour. The noise on the bridge grew as the Harrowing shouted their lord's name.

Behind Gzrel came his court. He liked to collect sorcerers, weighing and valuing them as others might jewels. There was Xiatsis in his mirror-fronted helm; Cottadaron, his body and armour so melded that he shambled; and, of

course, Maroth. The Harrowing's self-styled soothsayer gave a lipless smile as his hands stroked the flayed skin covering his chestplate. Maroth was Gzrel's High Magister, a title that might once have made Ahriman laugh at the presumption. There was, however, nothing amusing about Maroth.

Ahriman knelt as Gzrel halted in front of him. His armour ground and hissed as he bent his knees. It, like everything else, fitted what he had become. Studded pauldrons covered his shoulders and a mottled grey tabard hung from his torso. He held a beak-snouted helm in the crook of his arm, its surface scorched black. He had taken it, still smoking, from a burned corpse, and never repainted it. In the Imperium that mark of helm had a designation: *Corvus*, the crow. *A black crow helm for a carrion warrior*, he had thought when he first held it in his hand. It was the only piece of symbolism he allowed himself, and only then to remind him of what he had been and what he had become.

'I have an honour for you, Horkos.' Red steam breathed from funnels on Gzrel's back in time with his words.

'My lord,' said Ahriman, looking at the deck. Once armies had bowed to him, and primarchs had heeded his word. But that was a past he had broken with his own hand. Now he was nothing more than a shadow cast by the light of his memory. So Ahriman, once Chief Librarian of the Thousand Sons, answered to a false name and knelt to an unworthy lord.

'See,' said Gzrel, and Ahriman could tell that the lord was gesturing to his other sorcerers. 'So submissive, so pliant to the hand.' Ahriman could see the bladed tips of Gzrel's fingers flexing on the edge of his sight. 'I could not bend you to meekness so easily, could I, Maroth?'

'Not so *easily*, my lord,' purred Maroth. Gzrel chuckled.

Maroth means to kill him, thought Ahriman. *Not now, but soon, he plans to take Gzrel's life and then his throne.* Ahriman could read the soothsayer's intent as if he had shouted it to the chamber. None of the other sorcerers seemed to notice. Had Maroth already turned them, or could they simply not see what Ahriman could?

'But not you, Horkos. You take what falls from my hand and lick my fingers.' Gzrel paused, and raised Ahriman's chin with a bladed digit. 'Do you think your meekness pleases me? I thought you might rise to better, but no. You are a whipped dog among wolves, Horkos.'

'Yes, my lord.' Ahriman did not meet Gzrel's eyes. He would have to flee

soon. There would be no place for him under Maroth's rule, except as a skull hanging from a champion's armour. Once he could have stopped Maroth, could have taken the Harrowing from Gzrel and taught them the limits of their knowledge. It would be a simple matter for Ahriman. But he was not Ahriman. He was Horkos: the penitent, the exile. He would have to flee and find another place to shelter. He was not even sure if he could wield the powers that had once been as much a part of him as his own flesh. It was as if a portion of his soul had shrunk to a wasted shell.

Perhaps that is why they do not see me for what I am, thought Ahriman. He had not used his powers to their full extent for many years, lifetimes to some; at first it had been a denial, but now he wondered if they had died as the memory of Ahriman died. He could still feel and touch the warp, but it was an ember remaining as the sign of a smothered blaze. *They do not see transcendent power because it is not there. The shell of my weakness hides my past; they see only a half-broken creature and do not ask what it once was.*

'Yet, I keep you,' said Gzrel. 'Why do I keep you, Horkos?'

'For my service, lord,' replied Ahriman. He could smell the offal and iron reek that gathered around his lord.

'For your service,' repeated Gzrel carefully. 'And now I give you the honour of paying me with that coin. We have prey, and you are to help me take it.' Gzrel paused. 'You will be part of the opening assault. You will join Karoz's pack in the first wave.'

Ahriman thought of Karoz, of the Harrowing champion chained in one of Maroth's cells, mewling to himself, unable to remove his armour. Maroth had seeded something in Karoz's soul, something that was eating him from within. Ahriman glanced at Maroth. The soothsayer smiled back.

My fate is to die in this battle, thought Ahriman.

'A great honour,' said Maroth. The soothsayer's aura was red with malice in Ahriman's eyes.

'Thank you, my lord.'

Gzrel let go of Ahriman's chin.

'I give this honour to you, Horkos. Repay my kindness well.' Gzrel turned and walked away through the parting ranks of slaves and the clamour of the Harrowing readying for war.

'I will, my lord,' said Ahriman, but no one was there to hear.


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