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ALL IS DUST

JOHN FRENCH



A THOUSAND SONS SHORT STORY

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ALL IS DUST

by John French

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.

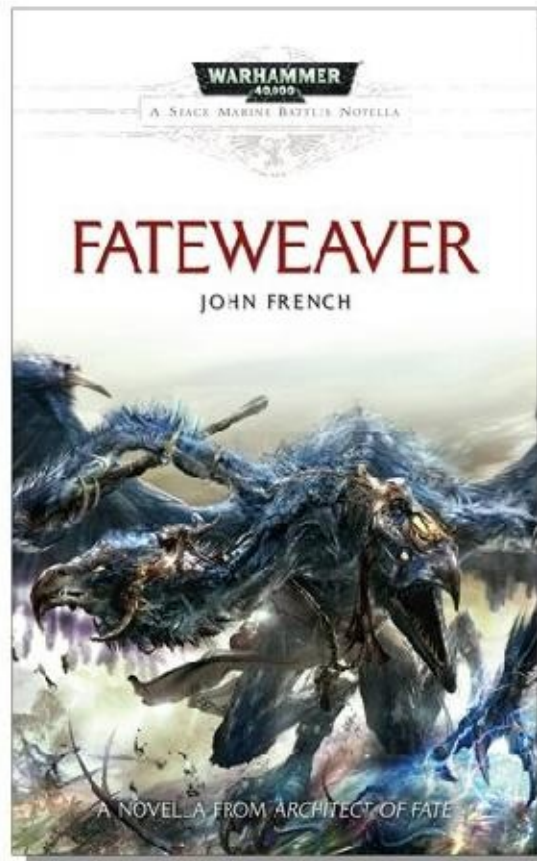
A blow strikes my shoulder. There is a cut in the metal of my armour, a dark gash through metal to the black void within. I feel nothing. The cut glows; it breeds green maggots of light, and then closes like a silenced mouth. I turn my head. I see a warrior pulling back his blade from another strike. 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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN FRENCH is a writer and freelance games designer from Nottingham. His work can be seen in the Dark Heresy, Rogue Trader and Deathwatch roleplay games and scattered through a number of other books including the award nominated *Disciples of the Dark Gods*. When he is not thinking of ways that dark and corrupting beings can destroy reality and space, John enjoys talking about why it would be a good idea, and making it so with his own traitor legions on the gaming table...that and drinking good wine.



The White Consuls answer a cryptic distress call, and Kairos Fateweaver reveals his place in the grand scheme. But even he has not foreseen the destiny that lies in wait for him...

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