



WARHAMMER
40,000

AHRIMAN: THE DEAD ORACLE

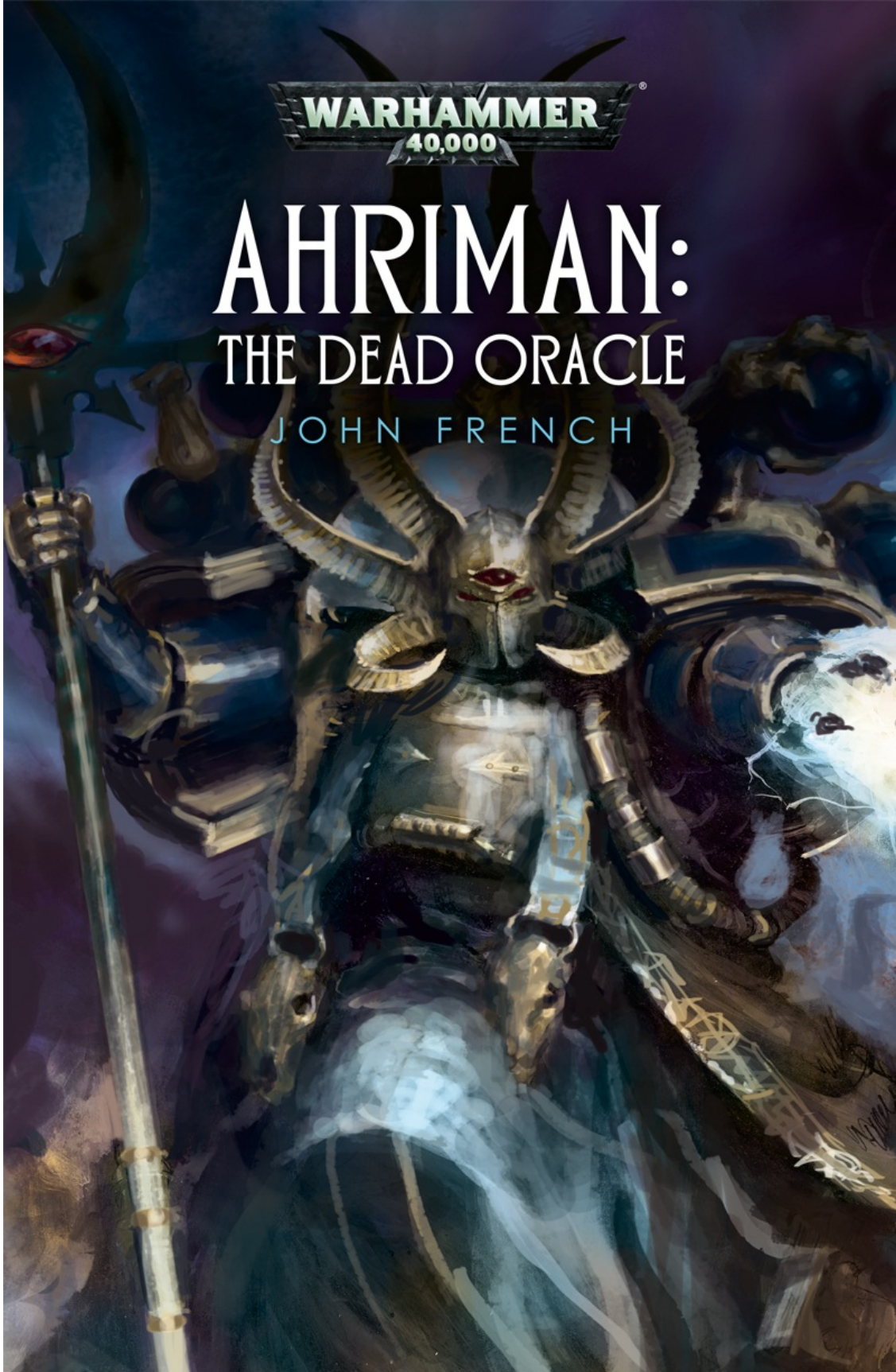
JOHN FRENCH



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John French

*'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. Astraeos 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 hungering 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'th'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.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John French has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile* and *Ahriman: Sorcerer*, plus the short story 'Hand of Dust'.

Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella *Fateweaver*, plus a number of short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

On Prospero, a solitary living soul walks across the shattered world. Beneath the ruined spires, Ahriman, exiled son of Magnus the Red and destroyer of his Legion, contemplates what once was.



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