

WARHAMMER
40,000

AHRIMAN

COMPLETE EBUNDLE



THE COMPLETE SAGA OF THE GALAXY'S
MOST INFAMOUS SORCERER

FORTUNE'S FOOL

Written by John French

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

– Numious, The Illuminator of Hilicia, executed for heresy

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

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

I am a binder of daemons and dealer in terrible truths. Others call our kind sorcerers, but I am the truth of that word given form. I have flayed eighteen mortals to tease a Prince of Excess into giving me its true name, and sold my first memory for a single sigil from a lost language. I have even starved and poisoned myself so that I could talk with the daemons of despair. Yet, having done all these things, and more, I have never flinched from any of them. But that one... murder I did for Ahriman all that time ago – when we were all so different, and so much was yet to happen – haunts me still.

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

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

Sugraais, I whispered to myself, through my teeth. +I am most pleased to see you, brother,+ I sent, resting weight and sincerity on the last sentiment. I was not attempting to hide my thoughts, and the sending would have been heard by all those gathered in the Nonogramiton's main hangar deck. I sensed the prostrated throng shiver with appreciation, and caught the subtle movement out of the corner of my eye as warriors in

green and gold armour shifted in approval. +The majesty of your welcome exceeds everything that could be expected.+

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

+Vile.+

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

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

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

+Vile?+

+Flawed,+ he continued.

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

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

+A way out, Ctesias+

I blinked.

+A way out...+

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

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

+The Wanderer of Paths?+ I asked.

Ahriman nodded, and I returned the gesture with weariness.

The Eye of Terror is a place of paradox, and those who dwell and war within it are creatures of pride and hollow ambition. Every warrior dreams himself a Warmaster, every demagogue thinks themselves a worthy princeling of Chaos and every witch-sighted fool thinks they alone can master the warp. Though some rise to touch the edge of their

dreams, few hold them in their hands, and those that do can often only watch as they drain between their fingers. But all, from aspiring lord of slaughter to doomed master of sorcery shout their pretension with the names and titles.

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

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

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

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

The frown clung to my face.

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

Ahriman remained silent for a long second. I shivered.

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

It was my turn to stare and be still.

+Why?+ I said at last.

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

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

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

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

+Of course,+ I said.

I was wondering where we were going; an audience chamber, I presumed, but I could not be sure. In other circumstances I would have extended my mind to read the space around me, but Ichneumon would

have known and that might have affected the delicate charade of courtesy we were both weaving.

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

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

Nekasu, I hissed to myself.

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

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

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

+One of us...?+

+One of the Legion.+

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

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

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

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

+I never thought you a simpleton.+

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

I bit my mouth closed and clamped my thoughts shut inside my head, wishing very much that Ahriman had sent Kiu, Gaumata or even

Astraeos to do this. I tried to think of ways of finessing the exchange, of sliding over the chasm that existed between us. In the end I gave up.

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

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

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

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

I tried to give a small nod to indicate a concession, but I could not do even that. It was more ridiculousness than I could bear. You might think that this sentiment was at best hypocrisy and at worst a form of wilful blindness. Perhaps you might be right; after all, the gods are real as well as their daemonic servants. These are facts, of which I am sharply aware, but for all that they exist and – as much as I draw on their power – I refuse to sully myself by offering them devotion that they neither need nor deserve. Those like Ichneumon who devote themselves to one of the great powers – for he is far from alone – hold a special place in my catalogue of contempt. Perhaps it is because of the gratitude with which they accept the gifts. Perhaps, it is because I do not like to be reminded of the lies I tell myself. Either way I do not like those who exalt in their service to the gods. In that, Ahriman and I agree.

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

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

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

Ichneumon glanced over his shoulder as he walked before me.

+Let us see,+ he sent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Haassuvir...’ I breathed aloud.

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

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

+Truly? I do not recognise the language.+

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

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

+How did this civilisation die?+

+I destroyed it,+ I sent.

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

+For their language?+ he asked.

+For their impudence.+

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

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

+Not a threat,+ I sent.

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

+Terms?+ I sent.

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

+Ahriman offers—+

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

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

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

It was my turn to laugh.

+So that is it? For all of your millennia of devotion you are still just a mercenary like the rest of us.+

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

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

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

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

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

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

+Why would you want that?+

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

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

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

+Yet you still want to follow him?+

+He is the fulcrum, touched by the Great Sorcerer, watched by the Court of Change. Where he goes the glory of change follows. To be at his side, and aid his work, is to serve the Grand Conspirator. There are none more high in the champions of change than Ahriman. Only he would deny that, and the paradox of his denial only sweetens its truth.+

+You are insane.+ I shook my head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But I had time to prepare.

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

Silence and stillness exploded from me.

Time slid out of focus.

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

The bolt shells crept closer to me.

The Eye of Change was a sculpture of heat. I could not move: the same chains I had just conjured into being bound my body. My thoughts were free though, and, while the same was true of Ichneumon, he had to react. I did not, and my next thought rose into my mind.

I blinked sidewise in reality. Bile touched my tongue.

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

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

Invisible fingers scratched over my flesh inside my armour.

My bolt pistol was in my hand.

The bodyguards were a juddering blur.

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

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

The shells I had fired exploded.

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

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

The force that boiled my blood faltered.

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

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

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

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

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

Nessutha...

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

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

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

+And Ahriman thought you would succeed?+

+He was sure of it.+

Ichneumon shook his head.

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

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

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

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

+Go on,+ he sent.

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

+And?+ Ichneumon asked.

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

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

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

+Not yet,+ I sent.

+I will not be— + he began.

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

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

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

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

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

Ichneumon looked at my hand then up at my face.

+Very well,+ he sent.

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

+ Surety?+

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

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

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

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

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

I made my head bow.

+Thank you, brother,+ I sent.

+It is done?+ asked Ahriman.

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

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

+Did you get it?+

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

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

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

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

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

+As you said he would.+

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

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

I walked on in silence. I would go to my chamber, take off my armour and sit on my granite throne and do my best not to think anything at all. When the Sycorax and the rest of the fleet slid into the warp's embrace I would be silent and alone – not thinking about what would be happening to the Nonogramiton.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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