



## THE FIRST PRINCE

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

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

The light is fading. My eyes which have seen so much, struggle to see these words as I write them. It will not be long now until I die for the

second, and final time. My soul will go to the reward that a life of wielding forbidden knowledge has earned me.

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

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

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

Death is silence. The place between here and there, between the noisy beating of heart and blood and the hush of eternity. Blank blackness surrounded me, total and complete. All I could feel was wind and the touch of dry dust. I could not feel my body: not my face, not the weight of my muscles, or the ache of the bones in my hands. And I could not remember who I was, or how I came to be there.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I could hear it smiling as it spoke, lips pulling back over sharp teeth, tongue sliding over the points. I could not see its face, but I did not need to. Some things are best known but not seen.

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

The claws began to cut deeper.

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

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

‘I make this offer once. Go now.’

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

‘My name is Ahzek Ahriman.’

The daemon snorted.

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

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

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

‘Impressively foolish.’ It did not sound angry. It sounded like it was enjoying itself. ‘The Court of Change cackles in appreciation of your

subtlety, Ahriman. The Plague Children fear the fire of your power. Even the dogs of the Skull Throne curb at the sound of your name. Yet you do not realise that that I have unrivalled power in this place. I am disappointed.'

'What are you?' growled Ahriman.

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

'An impressive collection of words.'

'You should know that words are never just words.'

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

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

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

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

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

'What?' asked Ahriman.

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

'What is the price?'

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

'I will not accept that.'

'In that case I shall be about my business.'

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

'Hold!' called Ahriman

The claw withdrew. Cold numbness flooded me.

‘Control is made of knowing what we have, and what we want,’ said the daemon, and I felt an echo of its satisfaction shiver through me.

‘Power is having something that someone else wants and cannot have.’

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

‘You cannot destroy me,’ said the daemon. ‘Such a thing is beyond you. So do not try and pretend that it is within your power.’

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

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

‘Lies.’

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

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

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

‘As you wish.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘She can undo any part of the lives of any of the men and women we saw in the streets, and she can do it with a word,’ said the daemon. ‘Her people call her the Sun Queen, because from her comes all that lives. People in lands far from here quake at rumours of her anger. Like her forebears she has broken enemies and taken their lands as her own. Here, in this small slice of existence she is not a human. She is a goddess.’ The daemon breathed, and I felt its rank presence shiver through me as it shook its head. ‘And in a few moments the most important thing she has, will be no more.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then everyone was shouting, and calling out.

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

‘Do you see now?’ asked the daemon.

‘The fire of inspiration falling from the sky,’ said Ahriman. ‘The manifestation of something so great and terrible, and outside of

comprehension, that it opens these peoples' eyes to the limits of their knowledge. If you know me as you claim, then you should know that this illustration of the power of enlightenment is wasted. '

'Yes, but no. Look at her face. Really look at her face. Think of the strength that was in those eyes before. There was worry of course. Doubt, naturally, but what is there now?

'Fear, determination, anger, curiosity.'

'And what is gone that was there before.'

'I... do not...'

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

'Why show me that?'

'As a gift. As a warning. As an offer.'

'There is no value in ignorance,' said Ahriman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'This is—'

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

Ahriman did not reply, and the legion of glowing figures began to flicker, and their names faded with them.

'Silence,' said the daemon, 'is as good an answer as any. You both believe me and don't. Such delicious paradox. So you do not want truth, nor lies, nor ignorance. What remains for me to lay at the feet of Ahriman,

greatest of sorcerers, greatest of fools?’ ‘Let us see. Let me show you my last gift.’

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

‘Where is this?’ asked Ahriman

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

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

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

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

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

The image froze, and silence replaced the clamour.

‘Do you recognise them?’ asked the daemon.

‘I do not,’ said Ahriman.

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

Ahriman did not answer, and I knew that he would be doing as I was, staring at the two monsters, wondering who they had been. They were daemons, immortal princes of the Changer of Ways, and the Father of

Plagues. Both had once been mortals, but their devotion to their chosen gods had bought them ascension to the circles of the neverborn.

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

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

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

‘And the other?’

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

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

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

‘I am not—’

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

‘You speak—’

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

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

‘It burns, does it not?’ laughed the daemon. ‘Truth, ignorance, power, there are no things deeper, no things darker, no fires more fierce. You are a slave. Your choices are not your own, no matter what you may believe. I offer you freedom, Ahriman. Take Ctesias’s place in my debt, and the chains will fall.’ Its voice was low, crooning, like a mother offering comfort to a child. ‘No other can promise you this. No other has broken those chains themselves. I alone am the salvation you crave.’

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

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

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

‘No.’

‘Then you will lose what you came to save.’

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

Ahriman laughed.

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

‘No!’ roared Be’lakor.

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

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

Chanting voices poured into my ears. Flame light spiralled around and above me. I could see a ring of figures in blue armour and white robes. Their hands were raised, fingers linked by chains of lightning. I was lying on my back, blood pulsing from the wounds in my chest and neck, pink foam frothing as I gasped. Ahriman stood above me, his horned helm a crown of brilliant light, his open hand splayed above my eyes. His voice echoed as he called

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

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

‘I call you into the light!’

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

‘I call you!’

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

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

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

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

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

‘You dare—’

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

‘You do not have the strength.’

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

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

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

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

‘I do.’

‘Pledge it!’

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

‘Good... now make it so.’

The daemon twisted, its substance spiralling into a column of fire and black smoke. I felt my heart beat a last time, and felt thousands of

invisible hands grip my flesh and begin to pull me down. And with the last scrap of life I heard Ahriman speak his question to the daemon, and I heard Be'lakor laugh as he answered, and then I felt the memory of both question and answer vanish as the blackness finally took me.

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

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

'Do not expect my thanks in return. You...'

'I did what I needed.'

'And what did you need from such a creature?'

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

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

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

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

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

'And what did you give it return for that gift?'

I did not answer him, but turned away and walked from his presence. We all have our secrets to keep, and mine are my own.