

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a Necron character from the Warhammer 40,000 universe. The character is depicted in a dark, metallic, and somewhat skeletal armor. His eyes are glowing with a bright red light. He is surrounded by swirling, ethereal green energy that appears to be emanating from a central point, possibly a portal or a source of power. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and vibrant greens, creating a mysterious and ominous atmosphere. The character's pose is dynamic, suggesting movement or the casting of a spell.

WARHAMMER
40,000

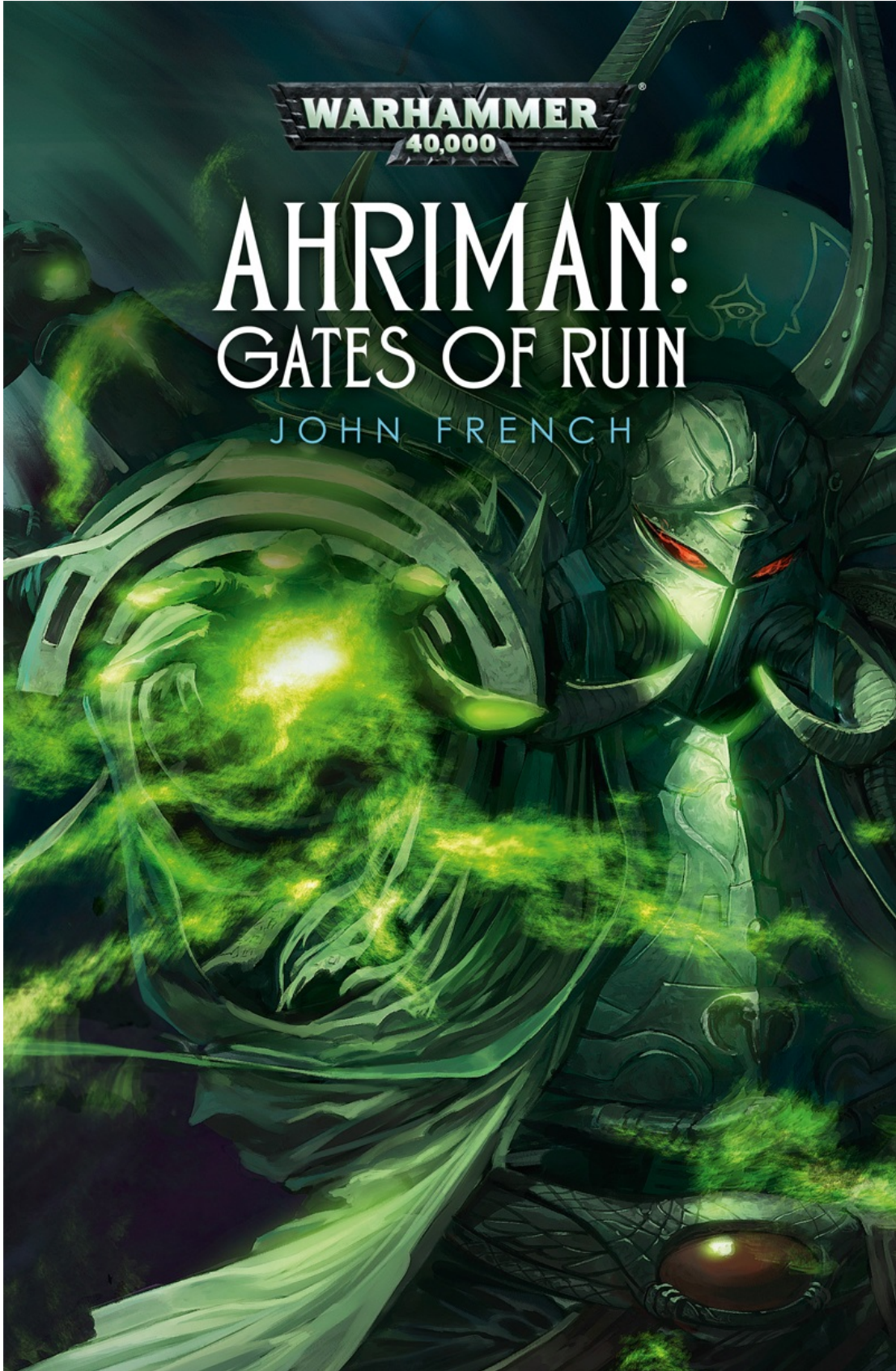
AHRIMAN: GATES OF RUIN

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'Do not pity those who are lost on the path. Pity those who reach its end, and see at last what they were seeking'

– Malcador the Sigillite, *Admonitions to the Solar Lords*

I am a follower who followed his lord.

My lord was Ahriman, and I am Ctesias. These are the stories of my time in his service, laid down in words as I watch my life fade with the candle that lights these pages. I will die soon, and with me so much of the past will die. There are others that were there, at Ahriman's side, in that lost age: Kiu, Sanakht, Gaumata, Gilgames, and later Credus, Ignis and the rest. Some perhaps still live now, but how many remember how things were in that time between the fall of Amon and the search for the Athenaeum?

Time has a habit of burying lesser events under the weight of later calamity and triumph. The extraordinary seems diminished when compared to the momentous, but it is still important, it still has meaning. So it is that I choose now to write not of the grand and terrible endeavours which would come later, but of the steps which took us there. This is the story of one such step, of how Ahriman took us out of the Eye of Terror for the first time, on our first exodus from the hell that is our home.

The creature tried to raise its head from the altar. Silver chains clinked as it moved, and symbols on the altar glowed brighter. White candles burned with a

steady green light at the edge of my sight, but they did nothing to banish the darkness of the chamber. The only true illumination was the cold glow of my staff, and the glow coming from within the chained creature.

I say creature, because that was what it was. The spite of the daemon had swallowed the flesh of the human that I had given it as a host. Its limbs had grown and bent with new joints. Black quills had sprouted from its back and shoulders, and the face was an explosion of fangs and red, lidless eyes. The skin stretched over its bones was transparent and the colour of amber. Within its body, organs floated like jellyfish and blood vessels were threads of red light. The man I had taken from the *Sycorax*'s machine decks remained only as a twitching pulse of soul light, shrinking as the imprisoned daemon ate it.

The creature strained against the chains for a second, and then flopped back onto the altar. It hissed at me, its face pulsing.

I sighed. It was the fourth daemon I had bound and put to the question, and so far each of them had proved as unhelpful as the last. It was not the most powerful daemon I could summon, but it was cunning and knowing. I had more, thousands more, all bound by their true names that I broke into fragments and kept in my memory. The shards of those names scratched at the edge of my thoughts, like insects in boxes. They wanted me to let them out.

If things did not start going better, some of them might get their wish, I thought. How many more times would I have to go through this tedious cycle before Ahriman at last accepted that there was no way of finding what he sought.

Knowing him, I was not sure that we would ever reach that point. I was more likely to run out of human hosts, daemons to questions and patience long before he would admit defeat. He had given this task to me and to me alone. While he sat in his tower and cast his mind into the realm of dreams, I had to find a way to do the impossible. I had to find a way out of the Eye of Terror.

'Give it to me,' I said, and the moisture of my breath fell as a frost through the psychically charged air. 'Give it to me and I will release you, and burn the memory of your true name from my mind.'

The creature hissed, and strained against the chains again.

'Very well,' I said, and closed my eyes for a few seconds. I was really very tired.

I moved away from the altar to where the shadows hid iron shelves worked into the chamber's walls. My hand found the stone jar I was looking for, and my fingers tingled as I picked it up. My mind formed a series of words, and the pictograms on the jar's surface lit with a molten glow. I let go of my staff and it

began to rotate in place beside me. The jar's lid came free in my hand. The smell of grave rot filled the air. I walked towards the creature on the altar. It had shrunk. The iron quills bristled from its flesh. Every one of its eyes fixed on the jar in my hand.

Daemons do not feel fear. They do not *feel* anything that we might consider emotion. They *are* emotion. A daemon is hate, desire and rage all congealed into things that want nothing more than to burn the mortal world that created them. They don't fear any more than a fish drowns. But rules and rivalries run through every mote of their existence, unbreakable and undeniable. And because of that nature there are things that even they cannot bear. There are things which, if they were mortal, we would say terrify them. I could banish the daemon. I could bind it for aeons, but both those were not threat enough. So instead I was going to give this daemon to another of its kind. I was going to let its essence be consumed by its antithesis. I was going to feed it to a daemon of decay.

'I know my feelings on this are both irrelevant and incomprehensible to you, but I would really rather not do this.'

I stepped up to the altar and looked down at the creature. It was very still. For a second it almost seemed like a living thing.

'I do not say that from pity. Just in case that was a point of confusion. It is more that while this will be as bad as such things can be for your kind, it will cost me as much to replace the resources that I am expending on this question.' I reached into the jar. The thing which emerged between my fingers looked like a scorpion made of polished bone and dried sinew. Its legs shifted with a dull creak as it clung to my hand. 'But needs must.'

The creature of the altar exploded upwards, screeching, limbs writhing, skin stretching. The chains snapped tight, and sigils flared on the altar. I muttered a word and dropped the thing of bone from my fingers. It grew as it fell, bone legs snapping out, sacks of yellow venoms swelling across its back. It landed on the creature. Scraps of flesh and skin sprayed up as it scabbled into the creature's torso. Oily black smoke poured into the air with overlapping cries of birds. The creature was juddering, its flesh crawling with blisters, its veins clotting to black rot.

'Give it to me,' I spat. The creature on the altar was shaking from side to side so fast that it was a chained blur. The click of bones and the hiss of venom beat in my ears as the scorpion dug deeper into the red meat. 'Give me the way to find Antilline Abyss.'

'*Gates... of... Ruin...*' The words rose from the creature. I raised my hand

over it and spoke a silent word. The thing of bone and decay went still inside the creature's mangled torso.

'The Gates of Ruin?' I repeated softly.

'All those who tread the path you seek only reach it through the Gates of Ruin.'

'That is fascinating, and I thank you for the additional detail, but it does not suffice.'

I begin to murmur a fresh set of syllables, and the thing of bone squirms to life again.

'The Gates of Ruin are the way you will find it!' it howls. I pause and the bone thing clatters to stillness.

'Explain, or I will let it drag you into the gardens of decay.'

'What you call the Antilline Abyss is a hole threaded through our dominion, a tunnel through the tides of what you insist on calling the Eye of Terror. Its edges are bound by the scraps of souls caught in the tides. They scream. The Gates do not just mark its beginning. They call to those that can hear them.' The creature on the altar smiled, and dozens of sets of lips peeled open across its body. Sharp white teeth gleamed at me. 'The Gates of Ruin sing, and sing without end. If you hear them you will find what you seek.'

I looked at the creature for a second. Daemons are lies, and the one I had bound to answer to the altar was a princeling of tricksters. But I have had millennia of binding such beings and cutting away their ability to deceive. It is my art, and I would hazard that there are few who can rival me in its mastery.

'Why do the Gates sing?' I asked.

'That I cannot answer,' it said with a chuckle that dribbled black blood from its grinning mouths. ***'But I can give you the ears to hear their song.'***

I do not answer for a long moment. You must understand that the Eye in which the warp and reality mingle is ringed by storms and currents. Ships that try to pass that border are likely to be ripped apart. There are ways through the storms. The greatest and most stable of these is the Cadian Gate, but the Imperium stands guard over that pass, and those not wishing to sacrifice vast armies cannot hope to go that way. That leaves the other, more dangerous, ways that are concealed by myth and lies. Ways like the Antilline Abyss.

I do not, and never have, seen the need of so many of our kind to return to the Imperium. We are lost and this hell is both our reward and our sanctuary. We are beasts of the Eye, and what can the realms outside it offer us but the taste of revenge? But Ahriman had commanded me to find a way, and I had agreed to

serve his will. For a price, of course.

I nodded at last, and flicked my hand above the creature on the altar. The thing of bone and venom pulled from the rotting cavity it had made in the creature's chest and flew to my hand. It shrank as it tumbled through the air, and curled into my palm when it landed. I slid it back into the jar.

'Give me the means to hear the song of the Gates of Ruin,' I said, 'and I will free you, and give you back your name. You have my bond.'

The creature chuckled.

'*Agreed,*' it said. Then its back arched and it began to shake. Muscles swelled and shrank along its torso, pulsing as one of its mouths opened. The chains snapped taut. A great gush of blood fountained from its mouth, and spattered down onto the altar and floor. Something hard hit the floor at my feet with a crack.

The creature collapsed to stillness. I bent down and picked up the object that lay in a pool of blood before me. It was a black sphere, or at least that is how it seemed until I lifted it to the light. I wiped the sticky film of blood from it and turned it in my fingers. A dim amethyst glow kindled in its centre, and from far away I heard voices singing, high and clear and sharp.

'*You have it,*' hissed the daemon. '*Now honour your debt, sorcerer.*'

With an effort I tucked the black sphere into a pouch at my waist. The song faded but still lingered on the edge of my hearing. I looked at the creature.

'Be gone,' I said, and brought my open hand down on the altar. A crack of thunder rolled through the chamber. The reek of burning hair and ozone flooded my mouth. The host creature flashed to cold cinders.

I shivered, suddenly more weary than I had been only moments before. I turned away from the altar and walked towards the chamber's only door, picking my staff from the air as I went.

+Wake the Navigator, Astraeos,+ I sent, aiming the thought for where his mind lurked in the *Sycorax*'s high citadel.

+You have a course for the Abyss?+ came Astraeos's reply, edged with blunt dislike.

+In a manner of speaking. I have a song for him to hear.+

'You should not come in here,' said Silvanus as I entered his chamber. The Navigator sat on the floor, a black velvet robe clutched around him. A mass of needle-tipped tubes hung from the ceiling above a couch moulded to the impression of a human body. Beads of viscous liquid hung from some of the

dangling needles. I could smell the sweet traces of sedatives and nerve signal inhibitors evaporating into the air.

+Oh, should I not?+ I sent. The Navigator flinched at my sending. I almost laughed. His skin was white-grey and drawn over fine bones. A strip of black silk wound around his head. The fabric bulged slightly where it crossed his forehead. Beneath the silk and embroidered stars his third eye rolled in its socket so as not to look at me. His mind radiated discomfort in a heavy grey wave. He was feeling sick, partly because of the effects of waking from his drug coma, and partly because that was the way he felt most of the time. His name was Silvanus Yeshar, and he did not like being awake; he did not like being what he was.

‘You...’ he began to glance up at me, then hesitated and looked to where Astraeos stood. ‘Nothing,’ he said, at last and rubbed his palms over his eyes. Thin webs of skin spanned the gaps between some of the fingers.

+You don’t like us being here, do you?+ I sent. He glanced up at me, winced and looked down again, shaking his head. +You think this is your place, and that by coming here we give you bad dreams.+

‘Get out of my head!’

+I hate to say it, Silvanus, but your dreams have nothing to do with us being here.+ I bent down and peeled his fingers from his face so that his left eye peeked out at me. There were flecks of blood around the iris. +It is because you are damned, little man. Totally, and utterly *damned*. Just like the rest of us.+

+Leave him,+ came Astraeos’s thought, hard and sharp. He flinched away from where he stood by the door.

+Interesting,+ I sent without looking around. +Have you added sentimentality to your catalogue of flaws, Astraeos? Or do you see this one as some sort of pet?+

I felt the brush of anger like a tongue of flames across my senses. Then it vanished. I looked around in time to see Astraeos take his hand from the sword at his waist. His mind shivered to hard stillness.

+Do what you came for,+ he sent, tight control vibrating through him.

+I am glad your restraint is well practised.+ I made myself grin at him. His anger gave me little pleasure, but sometimes a little is enough.

I looked back to the hunched form of Silvanus.

+I have something for you, Navigator. Something you need to hear.+

His lip trembled but I could feel anger surge in him, growing to blot out the fear.

‘Go and die somewhere,’ he hissed.

I laughed, and let go of his fingers.

+I like you Silvanus. I really do.+ Confusion rolled across his face and thoughts. +But I am afraid I need you to do something. It will not be pleasant. It will be a very long way from pleasant. But I have no choice. And neither do you.+

He shivered and glanced at me, but said nothing. I reached into the pouch at my waist and pulled the dark sphere into the light. High and shrill notes filled my senses as soon as my fingers touched it. I fought to stop myself from shivering as sharp pain and soft warmth slid up my nerves.

Silvanus looked at it, and vomited a mixture of bile and blood onto the floor.

‘No!’ he cried, and retched again. ‘No, never!’ He scrabbled backwards, trailing strings of sticky spit. His eyes stayed fixed on the sphere. I could see fresh pinpricks of blood around his pupils. ‘Get that thing away from me!’

I stepped forward. He shook his head, and the movement became a juddering spasm. Behind me I sensed Astraeos come away from the wall and draw his sword in a single flow of muscle and mind. He was between us in an eye blink, the ice light of his will shining from his sword’s edge.

+The Navigator is under Ahriman’s protection.+ The sending growled with shaped power. I felt the wall of his will slide around my limbs. Warding parchments burnt from armour. I swallowed carefully. I have been many things, but a warrior or battle psyker the equal of Astraeos was never one of them.

+Whose bidding do you think I do here, Astraeos?+ I sent, making sure that my thoughts held a measure of strength in them.

+He commanded you to do this?+

+He commanded me to find a way out of the Eye, and he did not specify any restriction on how I achieved that.+ I glanced at Silvanus, and then back at Astraeos. +When you have known Ahriman a little longer you will find that his ideals extend to ends, not means.+ I grinned again. Part of me could not help it. +When there is a choice between succeeding and failing he rarely quibbles over the price of victory.+

He stared at me, the green lens of his augmented eye a hard and steady light.

+He will not be harmed?+

+More than he has been already by being a Navigator puppeted by a coven of sorcerers to steer through a realm swarming with the nether-born?+ I shrugged both mentally and physically. +No. He will not be harmed. I will keep him safe. Though I cannot say that the experience will not leave its mark on him.+

Astraeos held his stare, and his mental grip on me did not release, though I

could almost hear the thoughts turning over in his mind. I sighed, and closed my eyes.

+If you are going to take the irrational path could we at least move past this part?+

The telekinetic blow rippled through my armour and body and tore me from the deck. I felt the sphere shiver, slip from my fingers, and land on the deck with a heavy crack. I landed face down, and felt the broken edges of bones grind in my limbs. I would have some healing to do later. I pulled myself up in time to see Astraeos sheathing his blade. He looked down at me, power radiating off him like the downdraft of vast wings. I confess that I was impressed. Even after all this time, I still am.

+Is that the extent of the point you wanted to make?+

He snarled, turned his back and returned to his position at the side of the chamber.

I looked back to Silvanus. The black sphere lay on the floor between us where it had fallen from my hand. He looked at it, and then back up to me.

‘No...’ he whispered, and there were flecks of blood in the tears rolling down his cheeks.

I picked the sphere up, and winced as the pain of my freshly broken bones flared brightly. The song surrounded me again.

+Yes,+ I sent, and pulled him upright with my free hand. +I need you for this. Ahriman needs you for this. Be thankful for it. It is what is keeping you alive. Now, open your hand.+

‘Please...’

+Open your hand.+ I put iron and pain into the sending, and his hand came up, long fingers opening like the legs of a pale spider. +Hear the song, and lead us to the Gates of Ruin,+ I sent, and dropped the sphere onto his palm.

+You are disappointed.+

I twitched my eyes at Astraeos. We had been silent in word and thought since we had come from the Navigator’s chambers. The *Sycorax* lay in the warp-tainted void and waited, just as it had done for many weeks. The passages we walked murmured with the sounds of distant machines, but few of the crew came to these high levels, and most that did would be avoiding encountering us. Two sorcerers walking in warplate, armed with sword and staff and the power to break reality, can have that effect.

+Disappointed?+ I mentally shrugged. +No.+

+But you were not anticipating how the matter has turned out?’

+Are you trying to take pleasure in what you see as my failure?+ I shook my head. +I did not fail. I did not know exactly what would happen. That is the nature of what I do. The nature of what we all do, in fact. From your swinging all that mental force around to Ahriman’s peeling truths from the future. None of it is science no matter what any of my brothers choose to believe when they mutter about aetheric energy. All of it is trying to shape and ride the winds of a storm. Better to be glad you get there than worry how.+

+The Navigator—+

+Will lead us to the Gates of Ruin,+ I interrupted, +and through the Antilline Abyss.+

Astraeos glanced at me out of the corner of his good eye, and took his turn to shrug.

+If you are certain.+

I nodded, but did not reply.

In truth I was not certain. We had left Silvanus in his chambers, curled in his sleep cradle, pressing the sphere to the fabric over his third eye. He had been smiling, and his thoughts were slow, calm circles of release and contentment.

We walked on in uncomfortable silence, my staff tapping on my strides, Astraeos always keeping half a pace ahead of me.

+The one who Ahriman summoned approaches,+ sent Astraeos. +The ship mistress says his ship has just translated and is making speed to join the fleet.+ I nodded, but did not reply. Astraeos’s mind pulsed with brief amusement.

+Sanakht was also not pleased.+

+On this, Sanakht and I agree.+

+Were the bonds of brotherhood between your kind so weak?+

+My brothers have never liked me, and the sentiment is universally mutual. I am sure you have noticed.+ I stopped walking. Astraeos also stopped, and the scar tissue of his face shifted as he raised an eyebrow. I leant on my staff and let out a breath. +I am an outcast within my Legion as much by choice as by circumstance. But Ignis has always stood apart.+

+Why?+

+He was of the Order of Ruin, and that is as good a start as any, and... well, you will see. +

Astraeos’s head swivelled up suddenly, and I could tell that he was listening to words that only he could hear.

+Ahriman has returned from his dream quest. He summons me.+

I nodded, and as I did, a wave of different voices, sensations and visions ghosted through me. The warp was shifting as though stirred by a sudden breeze.

+Of course,+ I sent. +His timing is as suspicious as ever.+ Astraeos was already moving away and neither replied or looked back. +I will come with you.+ I began to follow him.

+No,+ he snapped. +Ahriman wishes to see me alone.+

+Very well. If that is his will.+ I stopped.

+It is. Go and prepare whatever you need to with the Navigator. We will be making course soon.+

I bristled at the blunt tone of command. At heart I am a mercenary, and that means that I consider everyone's authority over me fleeting.

+You seem very certain of what is about to happen.+

+Ahriman has what he has been seeking.+ He stopped and turned slowly and looked back at me, an expression that was probably intended as a smile cutting across his face. +When he achieves one step on a path, the next follows swiftly. When you have served Ahriman a little longer you will understand this, I am sure.+

I could not bring myself to smile in reply.

+Silvanus.+

The Navigator did not move or reply.

+Silvanus, you will answer me.+

The sending was sharp, close to a mental blow. Still he did not move. I stepped closer, bending with a hum and whine of armour. The Navigator lay in his sleep cradle, his knees tucked up to his chest, his head tucked down so that he seemed to imitate a foetus. Sweat had plastered his black robes to his skin. He was breathing heavily and slowly. I could see the shape of his ribs rising and falling. He still had the black orb pressed to his forehead, but his eyes were shut. I touched the outer skin of his mind, but met neither resistance nor thoughts, just a warm flow of softness and calm.

'Silvanus,' I said with my true voice. Still there was no response. I gathered my thoughts and focus, and prepared to push deeper into his mind.

The doors to the chamber opened behind me. Pistons and servos whined as the deck shook with heavy steps. The presence of minds breathed across my senses as a wave of flame. My skin prickled and the wards etched into my armour and tattooed across my skin began to bloom with heat.

+He will not answer you.+

I sighed, and straightened.

+Does your mastery now extend beyond numbers and sums?+

I heard a clatter of gears and binaric.

‘No, that course of action is unnecessary,’ said a dry and clipped voiced that was the mirror of the voice that had just spoken in my mind. It was also not talking to me. There was another short clatter that almost sounded disappointed. ‘Yes. I am certain.’

I turned slowly.

Two figures stood between me and the rest of the chamber. One was huge, the other monstrous. Ignis, Master of Ruin, wore Terminator armour in colours which were the echo of the orange and black flame of the automaton’s shell. His face was bare, the features as smooth and impassive as I remembered them. Tattooed circles and lines shifted between designs on his exposed skin. His mind flickered with cold emotionless patterns that I did not recognise and had no desire to understand.

I slid my gaze from Ignis to the sculpture in pistons and machine joints that stood beside him. A lacquered carapace of orange rode over its chest and shoulders. Geometric designs covered the armour plates, cutting the polished orange with fine lines of coal-black. It was a battle automaton, a fact that the weapons in its fists and on its back left were established without doubt. This was what he had been talking to with his mundane voice.

+A pet? Or do you keep it for conversation?+

He waited for a long moment, his eyes moving over me systematically from feet to crown. Then he shook his head slowly and precisely.

+Credence guards my life,+ he sent.

I waited but he said nothing else. My teeth clamped together. I had forgotten how it was to talk to members of the Order of Ruin. The centuries that separated that moment from the last time I had seen Ignis had been a blessing in that respect.

+Thank you for clarifying that.+

Ignis nodded once.

+You have changed since I last saw you, Ctesias.+

+How kind of you to notice.+

+My observation was not intended to give you comfort.+ His sending was leaden with lack of emotion. Perhaps it is the daemons. Perhaps they have stolen some of my patience, or gifted me with a need for emotional subtlety not common in my kind. Whatever the cause, I felt my face twitch and my hand

clench on my staff.

I closed my eyes and let out a breath, letting the enforced calm roll through me. When I opened them I looked past Ignis. Ahriman stood beside Astraeos just inside the door. Both were armoured but without helms. Ahriman was gaunt, the pits of his face deep beside the sharp lines of his bones. He looked weary, ill even, but his eyes glittered with triumph.

+What is your will, Ahriman?+ I glanced between Astraeos, Ignis and his automaton.

+You have found a way to the Antilline Abyss,+ he said, and stepped forward. I noticed that he was limping ever so slightly. A vein pulsed at his temple and his face was not just tired but drawn. +For that you have my thanks, Ctesias.+

He stopped above the still shape of Silvanus and looked at him for a long heartbeat. I could feel his thoughts turning and the currents of the warp shifting with them.

+Ignis is correct. He will not answer you if you call him with thought and voice.+

+Why?+ I asked, suddenly too tired for the dance of intellect and words.

Ahriman glanced at Ignis, and nodded.

+The pattern of the Navigator's thoughts,+ sent Ignis, +is a spiral going ever out and curling ever inwards. It eats everything else that is in his mind, and it will continue without end.+ The Master of Ruin paused, and I glanced at him. The tattoos on his face had become still, the lines seeming to splinter his features into shards. I had the sudden impression of distaste and contempt, though I could not say why. +The ratios and progression of the spiral is... a thing I would not have let come into being.+

I shivered inside my armour. I did not know what Ignis had meant exactly, but I could understand what he was trying to say. It was what I had been worried about ever since I had given the Navigator the sphere.

+His mind beats to a song,+ I sent almost before I meant to.

Ahriman nodded, and looked at me.

+Will that song lead us out of the Eye, Ctesias?+

I broke his gaze, and looked at Silvanus, curled around a daemon pearl like a sleeping child. I thought about all the things that I had done for Ahriman, and all the uses he had put me to since I had come to his service. I wondered if there was more to this situation than I saw or guessed. I wondered what else Ahriman might be trying to achieve besides breaking the Eye's shackles. I remembered the offer he had made me when I lay bound in Amon's cells.

I blinked, shook myself and looked between the waiting faces of Ignis, Astraeos, and Ahriman.

+Yes,+ I sent. +I was not seeing if he would answer. I was seeing if he was ready. He is. He hears the song and only the song. He will take us to the pass and out of the Eye. He will take us to the Gates of Ruin.+

The warp closed over us. Fire ran down the spine of the *Sycorax* in a great burning mane as it pushed through swirls of congealed colour. Its sister ships rode beside and around it, linked to it by cords of silver blue light. Curling storms rose and fell around them, breaking over their Geller fields in shards of screaming shadow. The psychic connections between the ships billowed and snapped like ropes in a gale. Within the navigation sanctuary of the *Sycorax*, Silvanus sat and stared out at the madness beyond. Feeds and wires linked him to the helm throne, and beneath our feet a tower of machinery half a kilometre high linked his will to the ship. But the true connection between him and the fleet he guided were the minds of Ahriman and his chosen Circle.

The Circle and Ahriman played Silvanus like a puppet, using his abilities and senses like an extension of their own minds. From them, webs of telepathy stretched across the storms and current of the warp to minds who guided the other ships. It was a feat of delicate and terrifying skill. I had aided Ahriman in its creation several times since I had joined him, but on the road to the Gates of Ruin was the first time that I ever saw him follow and not lead.

Silvanus sat on the edge of his chair, the orb held in both his hands. His mundane eyes were shut, but he had shed the strip of fabric from his head and his third Eye stared, unblinking, into the light of the warp. Ahriman, Astraeos and myself stood with our backs to the open shutters, our eyes closed, the displays of our helms blanked to black. What I saw came from my second sight. I am a sorcerer, and I have cast my mind into the realm beyond, I have moved through it in dreams and visions, but even then the experience is as much construction of my mind as it is of the immaterium. To see the warp directly, to bathe in the radiance of its power and madness, is to invite worse than death. Only Navigators may look upon it directly and live. And even then they pay a price.

Silvanus's face was a slack mask hanging beneath his forehead. Pink spittle ran from his open mouth. Deep within his throat a sound gurgled and hummed as he breathed. The *Sycorax* began to dance, skidding down the faces of emotional squalls, pivoting over vortices of hate and lies. Joined together, Ahriman, Ignis

and I touched his mind lightly. The link was just enough for us to keep the fleet tied to his course, but even then we could only hear the song.

It was beautiful. I mean it was really and truly the most beautiful thing I have ever experienced. It was not sound, though when I think of it the dull memories of voices and high shrill notes are all I can recall. It was sorrow and joy, and pain, sharpness and bitterness, joy and glee, and the endless, endless promise of more and more. More until you drowned. It was the finest experience I recall, and nearly the worst. I shut every door within my mind and hardened my will until it was a wall of stone. Hours flicked past in instants, or stretched to aeons. And all the while Silvanus watched the Great Ocean of Souls and gurgled in mockery of the song that pulled him on. And we went with him.

I do not know how far or how long we travelled, and if I did such measurements would be meaningless. We passed through reefs of despair, and climbed the cliffs of bronze while the heat of wars as yet unborn scorched us. We were seeds of metal and stone carried on the wind of paradox. Seeds the size of cities, and with weapons powerful enough to burn those cities to ashes, but for that time our ships were nothing: specks in the eyes of gods that are alive, and yet have never lived.

The song drew us on and on, growing louder and stronger until, without warning, it stopped.

Silvanus shrieked. Anguish and pain flashed across the mental bond with him, and for the blink of an eye I felt the terror and despair of his life crash back into him. Then Ahriman broke the bond, and the *Sycorax* dropped from the warp like a stone falling from air to water.

My eyes snapped open, and voices began to split my thoughts.

+Where are we?+

+What is happening?+

+The rest of the fleet?+

+Where are—+

+Silence.+ Ahriman's sending ended the babble. I felt my hearts hammering in my chest, the blood drumming against the inside of my ears and eyes. Stillness and quiet pressed around me. The shutters had sealed over the viewing portals. The only light in the room was from the red and green glow of our helms' eyes.
+The rest of the fleet is not with us. I cannot feel any of them. Wherever we are, we are here alone.+

The automaton, Credence, flicked out a scanning laser and clattered a squall of binary.

Ignis shook his head.

‘Be at peace,’ said Ignis, ‘but be ready.’ Credence replied by arming its weapons.

My grip on my staff tightened.

I glanced at Ahriman. He was looking at Silvanus. The Navigator was shaking. His third eye had closed, but crusted red trails painted his face from forehead to chin.

‘No no, no,’ he was babbling, true eyes wide as he gazed at the black orb. He lifted it, pressed it against his eyes, his skin, his lips, every movement faster and more frantic than the last. ‘Nooo... nooo... nooo... Come back, please, come back...’ He lifted the orb and opened his mouth to swallow it.

Ahriman’s hand closed around the Navigator’s wrist. Silvanus tried to wrench it free, but Ahriman pulled it from his fingers. The Navigator collapsed, weeping, his surface thoughts a shattered pattern of despair. Ahriman looked at the orb, then glanced at me and tossed it to me. I caught it, expecting... I do not know what I was expecting, but the cold dead weight of the thing surprised me. The sensations I had felt when I had touched it before had gone, and no song filled my head.

+If it has ended,+ I thought aloud, + that must mean...+

+That it has led us to where it was supposed to,+ stated Ignis. +That is the most likely of all of the current possibilities.+

+But where are we?+ asked Astraeos.

+The Gates of Ruin,+ I sent, and all their eyes turned to me. +That is where the orb was to lead us.+

+Then why has the song ended?+ asked Astraeos, his fingers tense on the pommel of his sword. I shook my head.

+I do not know.+

+You found this way,+ spat Astraeos, disbelief and anger flowing with his thoughts. +Your craft brought us here. We were following you as much as him. And you do not know!+

+This is the warp, you simpleton!+

Astraeos began to draw his sword. Credence’s weapons twitched. Ahriman’s will slammed out, and I felt the moisture in my throat boil away as force and heat wrapped around my neck. Astraeos froze, a corona of cold light. He turned his gaze from one of us to another, and then I felt the fire in my throat cool, and the light holding Astraeos vanished.

+The ship’s mistress tells me that the sensors cannot see anything outside the

hull. Nothing. It is blank as far as they are concerned. And the warp drives refuse to wake.+

+Becalmed,+ sent Ignis, with a curt nod.

+No,+ sent Ahriman, +not quite. Something is happening on the lower decks. Carmenta cannot get any response from the machine wrights, but when she does get a vox signal she can hear– +

+Singing,+ I sent. Ahriman looked at me, and nodded.

+Yes.+

‘Hmmm... emmm... hmmm... emmm... hmmm.’

I twisted at the sudden sound. Silvanus was sitting up at the foot of the navigation throne, rocking, a smile on his face, and humming.

‘Can’t you hear it?’ he asked, swaying slowly. +Hmmm... emmm... Now it will never leave me. Now I will never leave it.+

I stared at him for a second, my skin creeping with cold.

Then I heard it. Broken shards of song tinkled and giggled from behind me. I turned and everyone turned at the same moment. All looked in different directions. The sound moved, skittering just out of sight. Every weapon in the chamber came to life. Ozone filled my nose. My own mind shifted, changing focus as I summoned the secret words of fire. Ahriman’s mind contracted, until it was a hard point of total focus on the edge of my senses.

‘Hmmm... emmm... hmmm...’ Silvanus hummed, the smile on his face still drooling stained saliva.

+Open the shutters,+ I sent. I felt Astraeos’s question and objection form, and bit them off before they became words. +We need to see what we face. Open them.+

He hesitated and then nodded. A finger of telekinetic force shimmered through the air, and the controls on Silvanus’s throne clicked as switches flicked over. There was a clank, then another and another. One by one the shutters covering the viewports folded back, and what waited beyond looked in.

I admit, I should have known. I should have anticipated that it would play out as it did. Daemons can lie even when they tell the truth. I had asked for a way to find the Antilline Abyss, and so leave the Eye of Terror. The daemon I had bound had told me that the Gates of Ruin lay at its beginning, and then had given me the means to find them. And I had taken what it had given me and followed the thread to its end. It could not lie to me. The bindings on it forbade that, but the truth it had given me was more lethal than any lie. Even after all the millennia that have since passed, I still wonder why I made that mistake. Perhaps

it was fatigue, or arrogance. Or perhaps it was because some deep and unseen part of me did not want to leave the Eye which had become my home and sanctuary. Perhaps that impish part of me wanted us to fail. The daemon had done exactly what I had demanded; it had led us to the Gates of Ruin on the edge of the Antilline Abyss, and it had given us to our doom.

Dead ships floated across a black abyss. Clouds of turning green light edged the dark, spinning and merging like the clouds at the defining edge of a hurricane's eye. The corpses of warships spun lazily, the bones of their structures glinting through the ragged skin of their hulls. Mountain-sized chunks of debris hung like irregular moons. There were hundreds of them, thousands of designs and origins I had never seen.

And around them the daemons circled like schools of fish around already stripped bones, turning as one, their skin glimmering as it caught the light of the storms around them. If there were thousands of dead ships, there were more daemons than I could count.

My thoughts were speeding past, as time slid to treacherous slowness. We were dead, and I had killed us. I had led us to a feeding pool and plunged us in. Ignorance was no excuse.

+The Gates of Ruin...+ sent Ignis, and his flat sending was like the falling of an axe.

The sending reached my mind just as a shape swam into view on the other side of the view port. It was a body of sculpted muscle and pale skin. Two circular eyes of black glinted above a slim face. The graceful line of its arms reached down to wet-edged pincer claws. It skimmed through the warp-saturated void with the slow movement of a shark cutting through water. Its mane of hair trailed behind, each strand flowing between colours. It was beautiful and revolting, and utterly terrible. I knew what it was. I had bound its kind many times before.

As I looked at it more slid into sight. More and more. I heard Silvanus rise and take a step towards the crystal viewport.

'I heard,' he moaned. 'I am here.'

I began to turn, but even as I did one of the daemons twisted and its eyes met mine. It grinned, perfect lips splitting over glass needle teeth.

The song was so loud now that it invaded my sight as well as my hearing, with the taste of bitter nectar on my tongue.

+We need to go! Now!+ shouted Astraeos.

And the world shattered into stillness.

Ahriman had not moved.

Silvanus's foot hung above the deck, his step forwards falling.

Ignis's mouth was opened, air drawing into his lungs to shout a word.

Fire wreathed Astraeos's sword.

And daemons turned towards us.

All of them.

+Fire the guns, mistress,+ came Ahriman's thought.

The daemons shot towards the *Sycorax*. Shrieks stabbed into my mind, and the world became a blur of sliced instants.

The view beyond the viewport vanished behind clouds of snarling faces and claws.

My mind formed the words of a ward.

The song was a deafening shriek in my skull.

I felt the ship shake as its guns fired.

The view beyond the crystal vanished.

Fire broke across my eyes, and my lenses dimmed as the *Sycorax* cloaked itself in detonations. The air blistered. Colour poured from nothingness, and the shrieks were rising and rising in my skull, blotting out every other thought.

A slender arm reached out of nothing and peeled open the air. Ahriman exploded forward, his hand reaching for Silvanus as a whip crack of force pulled the Navigator from his feet. A wet, red claw snapped shut where Silvanus had been. A lithe figure stepped through, claws clacking on the deck.

'Kill protocol!' shouted Ignis. Credence came forward with a thunder rolling of gears. Sheets of flame spat from its fists. Pale flesh boiled to black smoke. Casings fountained from the cannon on its shoulders. Ignis was wading towards it, blades of silver and lightning growing from his fingers as he slashed at spinning shapes.

More and more wounds were opening in the midair. The scent of hot blood and sugar filled my mouth. My eyes were filling with spinning shapes of colour. I sensed rather than saw the daemon. It lunged at me from beyond reality, its talon and body forming as it struck. I caught the blow on the head of my staff. Silver-laced iron shattered warp-born bone. The daemon spun back, screaming in pleasure and pain. I spoke a word in my mind and fire poured after it. It pirouetted aside and I saw my flame char its perfect skin.

'You will be mine,' it called to me in a voice of glass and razors. I looked for Ahriman, but the air was a curtain of fire and bleeding reality.

Astraeos was striding forwards wreathed in cold light. A daemon spun to meet him, its arms wide. His sword was a burning sheet as he cut. The daemon ducked

under his blow, sprang off the deck, and landed on his shoulders. Its arms folded around him as though in an embrace, its head dipping down beside his helm, claws reaching for his neck. I felt the pulse of raw power as invisible force ripped the daemon into the air, and tore it in two. Blood and ectoplasm misted the air. Its last sound was a laugh.

The light and fury parted, and for a second I saw Ahriman. He was pulling Silvanus to his feet, a sphere of white-hot debris orbiting him. Daemons circled him, tumbling faster than my eyes could trace. I tried to reach out with my mind but, the warp was a wall of screams and sharpness. Then Ahriman turned his head, and his eyes met mine. The daemons were crowding around him, their claws clashing against the bright sphere around him.

+Ctesias,+ he began, but I never heard the thought completed, because in that instant a claw snapped shut on my arm.

Ceramite split like skin. Blood gushed out, and I was screaming, and screaming, and the pain was the burn of acid and the taste of honey. I froze, my body juddering in place. The daemon leant closer, tongue licking needle teeth. Blurred murder filled the Navigator's sanctuary. The warp was pouring in through the ship's hull. Pale figures spun amongst spears of flame and lightning. Blood and colour sweated from empty air. I could see Ahriman, his hands on Silvanus's skull, unmoving even as a towering figure of pale skin and razor edges unfolded in the space behind him.

+Ahri—+ I shouted with all my will. But the daemon's claw bit deeper into my left arm, and fresh agony stole the warning

Hush, the daemon whispered to me. I felt the tip of its tongue touch my cheek. Its eyes were black pools in its perfect face. **Hush now, my sweet one.** The shriek poured from my throat, ripping skin and blood from my lips and mouth. Hundreds of sensations flowed through me: hunger, rage, happiness, the brush of petals and the stab of needles, on and on, more and more, brighter and faster than the grey world in which I was about to die.

The daemon shook its head and hooked the tip of its second claw onto the collar of my armour.

Do not be afraid, beautiful soul, it purred. It pulled the claw down and the armour over my chest parted like silk. **This will not be over quickly, or without pain.**

I screamed and its smile glittered with points and edges.

A fist of fire-blackened metal snapped shut on the daemon's skull. Red jelly burst across my face. Credence yanked the body backwards and triggered the

flamers in its wrists, then tossed the shrivelled remains aside. It turned, planting its legs to either side of me, and its cannon roared its challenge and defiance at the tide.

+Ctesias.+ The voice reached me, but my head was spinning. +Get up. Move .+

I began to rise, but my muscles were shuddering with the daemon's touch.

A hand reached down and yanked me up. I looked up into the lenses of Ignis's helm.

+Where is Ahriman?+ I asked, feeling the sending tremble as it formed.

+I am here, brother.+ Ahriman walked towards me, dragging Silvanus, green fire whirling from his hand.

Behind him a towering daemon followed. Jewels hung from its flesh, and clouds of musk smudged the air around it. A bovine head swayed atop its torso. It lifted one of its four limbs and pointed; the gesture was beautiful and lazy. A red tongue of fire lashed out, the air around it glittering with blood and frost.

Ahriman raised a hand. The lash coiled around his arm, pulsing, cutting and sucking through his armour. Power flared from him, exploding outwards into the warp. The psychic shock wave lifted daemons from reality and blew them to tatters of black slime. He yanked the red lash from the air and spun. The bull-headed daemon bellowed. Ahriman whipped the stolen lash of fire across its flesh. Mother-of-pearl skin parted. Black fluid gushed from the wound. Ahriman struck again, but this time the daemon slid aside as though it had not been there, and a claw lashed out. A sphere of light snapped into being around Ahriman and Silvanus. Blue flame exploded as the claw struck, and the shield burst with a flash. The daemon staggered, its claw cracked and burning. I waited for Ahriman to strike again, but no blow came. I glanced at Ahriman. He was still standing, but I could feel the fatigue shuddering off him.

The daemon hung back, circling, cloven hooves chiming on the deck, nostrils pulsing as it breathed incense into the air. The lesser daemons parted before it, hissing and mewling in delight.

The song was rising higher and higher, and I could almost see the *Sycorax* drowning as the legions of daemons swarmed through its hull. There would be blood flowing down the decks. Wards would be melting from walls, bullets flying from defence guns, and all the while the daemons would be dancing in the ruin. I could hear it, the screams and gunfire were rippling through the warp, blending with the daemon's song, calling more of them to feed like blood spilled in shark-infested water.

+There are more coming,+ I called to Ahriman. Blood was still pulsing from my arm. The daemons had paused in their assault but it was just the calm that comes before a wave crashes down. +This is not just a gate, it is a feeding ground.+

+We will not leave,+ sent Ahriman, and I could feel the control and effort in the sending. His eyes were still locked on the circling greater daemon. +The Antilline Abyss lies beyond here, and we will pass through.+

+We will die here!+

+No,+ he sent calmly. +We will not.+

+How?+ I sent, bitterness and false laughter heavy in the word. +You have a secret, or a weapon to free us?+

+I do,+ he sent, and just as he did the greater daemon charged. +I have you.+

The greater daemon was a blur of shimmering light. Its lesser kin followed with a howl.

And I understood what Ahriman wanted me to do.

I wish I could have said that I hesitated. If I had paused perhaps we really would have ended there, torn to shreds in a well of screaming souls on the edge of the Eye. I did not pause. I did what Ahriman wanted me to do. Just as he knew I would.

I reached into the segmented compartments of my mind, and threw doors of all the cells of memory open. Tens of thousands of fragmented daemon names poured into my consciousness. Ciphers snapped through my thoughts. Syllables rang together, became words and phrases, became black presences digging into the flesh of reality. The first name came to my mouth and I spoke it.

The charging daemons and the whirl of combat stuttered. Yellow and black smoke poured from my mouth. Sounds echoed and veils of rust peeled from the root and deck. A ball of blistering fat formed in the air, and grew and grew and grew, slower than spreading rot, faster than a gust of wind. The Maggot Lord, exalted servant of the Father of Decay, split reality and swelled into a full being. I had bound it in the temple of a dead oracle and never thought that I would ever want to bring it into being again. A foolish thought, even for me. I felt it pull against the bindings of the summoning. They held, but I did not give it the chance to try again.

+Destroy them,+ I willed.

The Maggot Lord exploded forwards, rotting muscle splitting its skin. The bull-headed daemon shrieked with rage and pivoted to meet it. Claws buried themselves in rolling blubber. Dead flies and pus gushed out. The Maggot Lord

laughed, and its arms gripped the bull-headed daemon and embraced it. I saw its mouth open, splintered roots of black teeth on a cave of tumours. Its laugh boomed again, just before it bit down on the bull-headed daemon's skull.

The next name was already free of my lips and a haze in the air.

Chel'thek, The Dragon of the Hundredth Gate, uncoiled from a whirl of fire, mouths spitting chains of lightning. Claws split its flanks, and wobbling spheres of arms and legs popped from the wounds. Daemons slid through the walls and floors as they surged to meet the Maggot Lord and the Dragon. Colours flashed between shades; distance and nearness collapsed then snapped back. The song of the daemons was now a discordant cacophony.

I had fallen to my knees, my unwounded hand gripping my staff, as name after name came up from within me.

Daemons of brass and anger, of hunger and mindless despair, came to my call and spilled out through the ship and void. On and on they came, the store of mortal lifetimes of collecting, binding and bargaining. I could not stop it even if I had wanted to, and in truth, I did not want to. My eyes blurred with acid tears, and my tongue had blistered, but I did not care. A wild joy had taken me. Some carry beautifully crafted swords all their lives, and never realise, until they are daubed in blood, that the pleasure comes not from owning a sword, no matter how perfect, but from letting it cut.

The daemons poured out with the words and I heard the clash as two immortal armies met, and I was glad.

In the void around the *Sycorax*, beasts of metal and glowing flesh ripped at things that ran through the vacuum on back-slung legs. On the gun decks and passages the slave crew and serfs fled for safety. Winged figures clad in brass and smoke flew beside huge rotting flies. Swarms of clawed figures crawled over rolling shapes of jellied puss and tentacles. Sheets of spell light and rainbow fire painted the vacuum.

On and on I spoke the names, my sight boiling away and my throat tearing with each new syllable until I was aware of nothing, but the sounds running from me like blood. I was dying, my life charring at the edges but I did not care.

I do not know how long I spoke, or how many daemons I named and summoned. The only thing that reached me in that age was a roar of pure focus and power which shivered through the warp. I recognised it. It was Ahriman, shouting into the beyond, the voices of Ignis and Astraeos joining him as he called the scattered ships of our fleet to come to his light. I heard that summons, but it did not shake me, and so I rolled on and my store of life and names began

to dwindle, until I was just a voice speaking to itself.

+Stop, Ctesias,+ came a voice. +It is done. +

I heard and the voice checked the flow of names.

+It is over. Dismiss them.+

I felt my mouth moving. I did not want to obey. I wanted to let all the poisonous knowledge within me flood out and leave me empty.

+Please, Ctesias.+

I obeyed, and felt the acid of my tears blister my cheeks.

The touch of a hand brought me back to awareness. I was still where I had been. Folds of charred ectoplasm and conjured flesh lay on the floor all around me. The air reeked of rotting meat and burning hair.

The first thing I saw was Silvanus, sitting on his chair, head lolled back, eyes closed. He looked dead, but for the slow rising and falling of his chest. Astraeos stood beside him. Slime and burned blood lacquered his blue armour. The ship was still – still and quiet, no song, no screams of killing, or battle.

‘We are within the Antilline Abyss,’ said Ahriman from where he crouched at my side. His head was bare, and though he looked tired I recognised satisfaction in his expression. ‘The rest of the fleet reached us. Two ships were lost to the passage, but the rest are beside us while we rest and repair. There is still a long way and many more jumps until we are beyond the Eye, but the first step is complete. We are past the Gates of Ruin.’ He nodded carefully. ‘Thanks to you.’

I looked down from his gaze. My hands and arms were shaking. My mouth filled with sharp edges and I felt weaker than a mortal child. It had become a familiar consequence of serving Ahriman, but this was the most spent and damaged I had been in a long, long time. I forced my limbs to stillness, and after a moment managed to get my tongue to work.

‘This is what you wanted me for?’ I said, my voice a croak. ‘When you negotiated my service, did you know it would come to this? The binding of the Maggot Lord, the Oracle, Be’lakor – was it just so that I could find and break the Gates of Ruin?’

He rocked back, watching me carefully. The feather touch of his thoughts brushed through my own as he read the surface of my mind. I did not have the energy to resist or muster anger.

‘No,’ he said after a long pause. ‘I did not have exactly this in mind, but it is good to see first what you are capable of. You have served the future of our Legion well, but the purpose I have for you waits in the future’

‘The Legion...’ I snorted, and felt the tremors in my flesh begin again.

‘Yes,’ he said and straightened. ‘The Legion. We all have to have something to serve. Even those who believe they do not.’

I shook my head, but could not muster a stronger objection.

Looking back, with all life times that have piled into ages between that moment and this one, I think I loathe him more now than I ever did then. I write this and I think of all that I know now that I did not then, and all the ways in which fate would play out to make so much of those days seem like cruel jests. I look back and I realise that there is one reason above all the rest that I hate Ahriman.

He was right.

We all need something to serve.

And we cannot choose what.

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 short stories including 'The Dead Oracle' and '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.

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